



-the
deceiving-

カゲロウプロジェクト

じん(自然の敵P)
イラストしづ
Story:Jin
Illustration:Shidu



Kagerou Daze V - the deceiving –

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“...no no, it's the truth. I have no reason to lie about this anyway.”

As I finished my sentence, the girl's expression told me she was suspicious.
Probably, of me.

...it is intelligent to suspect.

Towards someone like me, someone who is good at fooling others' eyes, suspicion could be considered the smartest thing to do.

“You don't trust me, huh...I'm just trying to tell you how to find your 『original body』, that's all.”

In reaction to my words, the girl, still stubborn, reluctantly nodded.
Well, can't blame her.

After all, I said it in such a mysterious way, it's only reasonable that she doesn't trust me.

Of course, I have a reason for saying it in this strange way.

Even I don't want to be hated by others.

I just always want others to distrust “the me that even I can't trust.”

I can't understand myself.

What I like, what I dislike, what I want to do, why I'm here.

What sort of nature I have, I don't know at all.

That's why I don't want others to believe the words of someone like me.

Suspect, deny, even breaking me would be better.

Only like this will I be able to, once again, find the - 『real me』 when it appears.

...having said that, this could be a 『lie』 too.

Not being able to see my true heart because I've piled lie upon lie, it's really nerve-wracking.

However, this kid could really be a good kid.

Having a strong 『self』 that is capable of suspecting others. It's really something I envy.

“...well then, let's do this. Before I bring you to that place, I'll tell you a story, one you won't get bored of. If you do, you're free to go wherever you want.”

The girl still looked at me with eyes of distrust.
That's right, this is what's supposed to happen.

"Aa~h, it's not a weird story, you know? It's just a recount based on personal experience. Though it's nothing worth bragging about, it won't bore you."

"...how about you just treat it like a joke, and try hearing me out?"



On the rooftop that certain day

And then, Haruka ate all of it! You know, he did it even though the doctor already tried to stop him?! He actually said something like 'It's okay because it tastes good~'" Finished with her aggressive rant, Takane sighed.

We were on the school rooftop on a calm, breezy afternoon. The sun left no spaces dark; it shone on all floor tiles, gently heating up every single one of them. Between the time I sat down here and started listening to Takane talk till now, it had been around ten minutes.

"Ahaha. It must be tough for you, Takane."

Even though I gave such an impersonal response in an attempt to seem like I was minding my own business, Takane still said with a frown, "Ahhh as soon as I start talking about it, I get carried away and angry."

Takane is a second year in this high school, and is also one of the students in the Special Needs class.

Likes eating buri daikon and hates tomatoes.

Skilled at games, her hobby is gaming, the homework she has to do is also to game; she's a typical gamer.

Single child, her parents are almost always overseas because of their jobs. As a result, it seems that she is living with her grandmother.

But out of all these features, the most prominent one would be that she is always agitated.

Even now, despite the fact that she was just fretting over a few things, she just seemed as if she was mad.

To be honest, if a topic is going to make you angry, it's better to avoid it and try not purposely bring it up.

I guess when they say "a girl is in love," it results in them not even being able to accomplish this.

The truth is, Takane is in love with a boy in her year, named "Haruka."

No no, she's never actually told me before, but as the one who listens to all her complaints, all the "and then Haruka"s, of course I would notice something like this.

Because of this, all Takane's rants about Haruka need to be interpreted as her way of showing her affection for him.

If I suddenly said something along the lines of “What a terrible guy~” in agreement, this would’ve actually caused trouble.

Yes, to avoid causing trouble, I must live a life where I just mind my own business and keep to myself. This is, in order to survive the days in this school, the most important point to remember.

“Speaking of which, aren’t those guys taking way too long? How long does it take for them to just buy lunch, seriously?”

“Mm~ I guess it’s because...there are too many people in the canteen right now?”

As I finished my sentence, Takane grunted out “Who knooooows.” She really is someone that is spiteful and difficult to deal with.

Then again, I have no right to say this.

Takane, who had been looking out towards the door that separated the rooftop from the floors below, appeared to have suddenly thought of something she wanted to say, and slowly opened her mouth.

“...right. Since those two guys aren’t here, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Actually, it’s nothing. It’s kind of weird to ask this out of the blue...” Takane said.

To avoid the topic, her eyes wandered off elsewhere again.

What exactly did she want to ask. She couldn’t possibly have more to rant about.

“...Ayano-chan, do you...have someone you like?”

I was caught off guard by a question like this.

I hadn’t thought Takane was the type to think about things like this.

“S-someone I like? Asking that all of a sudden...”

Takane’s voice grew high-pitched —flustered, she said, “Eh?! Ah, was it that sudden?! You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to! Ahahaha!”

What was there to be so embarrassed about? She’s stupid as hell.

“It’s okay, there’s nothing wrong with answering. Because...I don’t like anyone.”

As I said this, Takane suddenly froze, and stared at me with wide eyes.

“W-what’s wrong? Did I say something strange?”

“N-no, it’s nothing...” Takane said, and then nervously laughed. From the way she was acting, it was easy to predict the answer she expected me to say.

Most probably, she wanted me to say that I liked *that* guy.

...thinking about that, my mood inevitably got even worse.

If I could, I would’ve actually went home immediately. But of course, I couldn’t have done that.

In order to change the topic, I said, “But really, they’re really taking a long time. I wish they could hurry up a bit...”

Then, Takane replied, “Seriously, what are they even doing?! I’m super hungry~!”

...in a few minutes, I guessed that those guys would arrive with lunch.
If so, I was going to have to go through a lot of bothersome things again. Really, what a pain.
Especially that guy. To be honest, I didn't even want to see his face.
I'd hated him from the first moment I met that guy.

As I thought about this, I heard the sound of the door click as the doorknob turned.
"Ah~! I'm really sorry for being late! I bet you're hungry~"
"I can't be helped. We had to push and shove past the crowd."
Two voices drifted through the crack in the door as it opened.
Though they came earlier than planned, it didn't matter anymore. I had to live that way again, just I had in the past, with no attachment to anything or anyone, I just had to mind my own business.

I softly took a breath and spoke with a smile.

"Welcome back, Shintaro."

Yobanashi Deceive 1

"...as expected, it still hurts quite a lot."

I couldn't help but cringe at the pain.
I used my hand to touch the source of it all, my right cheek, and the pain spread with the heat of a fire, from my ice cold fingertips to the center of my brain.
I was beaten at around 11 o' clock.
Though a few hours had already passed by, the pain did not seem like it would go away any time soon. In fact, my right cheek was getting hotter and hotter, and appeared to have started swelling.

"Really, this is such a bother."
I recalled that in the fridge, there were ice packs left over from when Mother bought cake.
Using those, I should be able to stop the swelling.
If a scar was left behind, there was going to be a lot of trouble.
Before, the neighbouring women had constantly asked, "How did you get hurt?" and "Who hit you?" It was really the worst.
If, like last time, a strange man came to the door again, I really wouldn't be able to take it.

Seriously, why did that guy keep meddling in my business when I would be much better off without anyone's help?

Right now, with injuries as small as these, this isn't even a problem at all.

Yes, something like pain was nothing to worry about.

To raise my spirits, I gently sighed and pushed myself backwards against the bench I was sitting on.

In the afternoon, the heat that had been similar to the heat in a steamer began to ease, and at some point I ended up idly loitering in the park.

Even though the wide blue sky didn't seem like it was going to darken any time soon, the sunlight began to be obstructed by clouds, and the sky was much gloomier than it had been earlier.

Less than an hour ago, children that played on the slide and repeatedly dug pits could still be seen.

But now, there was only one girl who was madly practicing her backward swings on the horizontal bars, and all the others had left without a trace.

This was strange.

Without meaning to, I looked over at the solar-powered clock standing in the park - the clock hand was steadily pointing towards 5pm, and as if they were coordinated, the reverb of the broadcast that had been playing also ceased.

Most likely, these kids who had disappeared were following the "rules" made by someone they didn't even know.

Adults are always wary of the children who violate these rules. With this in mind, making the decision to walk home with them hand in hand is an intelligent one.

In the end, the world we live in is constructed from the soil that adults call "rules."

By openly rebelling against these rules, you are ultimately digging your own grave.

Only relying on us, naïve kids who don't even know how to survive on our own - even if the adults grimace and cry, the world won't change at all.

Of course, there are those who are enjoying the world as it is and are indifferently living lives like ours, and don't appear to have any intention of changing the world either.

No, I guess I shouldn't say that.

That's right, the searing pain that had been on my left cheek yesterday was on my right cheek today.

These minor differences might also be considered 'change.' It's just that these unimportant things don't really make an impact on anyone.

Even I think I'm quite a strange person. I also think I understand something others don't.

But, this is also because I don't have any friends, and I'm always alone at home; I've come in contact with more vulgar things than others.

But though I'm merely one step ahead of the children my age when it comes to knowledge, that's not really abnormal.

No matter what, today, I also followed the “rules” Mother set.

Spending the whole day in the park, blending in with all the other children playing, is also part of the rules.

In the morning, after I heated the water for Mother when she comes back from work and prepared breakfast, I always went to the park.

From that point on, till dusk - from when mother was out at work until she returned - I would kill time in the park, and then if I had been ordered to buy anything I would buy it, go home, clean my room, and then sleep.

Following this series of rules is my duty, and also everything to me.

While this would make my whole world seem simple to the max, I never seemed to do well enough, always making Mother angry.

Because I forgot to buy toilet paper yesterday, and broke a cup today, Mother was extremely mad at me.

Every time Mother was angry, she would beat me - but the hand Mother hit me with was, surely, in just as much pain as I was in.

After she hit me, Mother would apologise in tears; I never knew how to cope with this.

But the more I tried to do better, the more mistakes I made.

Even if I tried to do something that will make Mother happy, somehow it'd always result in the complete opposite; how strange.

Speaking of which, one time, when the remote control for the TV stopped working, Mother indignantly said it was “a useless thing” and threw it into the bin.

This was the first time I realized - the ones that did not follow the rules, the things that did could not be used were considered “useless.”

From what I could gather, “useless things” and “me” were very similar.

Always causing my mother, tired from work, to be angry for no reason, only causing her to be in pain, was there any difference between a “useless thing” and me?

Like these “useless things,” I was probably also be replaced if I didn't meet the standards.

I don't understand.

Why did I only cause Mother to be unhappy everyday?

Since I never did anything but hurt Mother, why was “I” even born?

In the end, to “me,” why did Mother even...

Every time I thought of things like this, my chest couldn't help but ache.

Though I stopped crying over pain, though I didn't request for this, somehow, the tears began spill from my eyes, slowly trickling down my face.

No. I couldn't cry. I had to think about other things.

If someone else saw me like this, I wouldn't know what to say.

If, like last time, someone tried to cause trouble for Mother, leading to us not even being able to stay together...

That would be terrible. I wouldn't be able to take it. A world without Mother is something I never wanted to even imagine.

There was one hour left.

There was one hour before Mother was going to wake up to go to work, so I decided it would be a good idea to stay put in this place until then.

Afterwards, I planned on buying a new cup to replace the one I broke, return home, and then stay there.

No matter what, as long as I could keep to these "rules," Mother wasn't going to get hurt today.

Which meant that tomorrow, definitely...

...definitely what?

Just as this question surfaced in my mind, I heard a quiet 'geh' and spun around.

Bewildered, I looked at the sight before me and found that the girl who had been on the horizontal bars was now lying, on the ground, flat on her back .

I scanned the girl over and over again in shock, though she made no attempt to get up and just spread her arms out, continuing to stare at the sky above.

What exactly had she been doing to end up in a position like this?

Even someone as twisted as me wasn't stupid even to actually put my effort into thinking about a question like this.

"Hey, you!"

The words I carelessly yelled out did not receive an answer, and all I could hear was my own voice echoing in the park.

Facing this ominous silence caused chills to run down my spine.

"T-this is bad....!"

I couldn't help but stand up and, in the process, used all my strength to take a step on the ground.

Facing this sudden "emergency," my unreliable brain - as expected - stopped functioning.

The "worst case scenario" I had heard about so many times on television and on the radio rushed into my mind like the waves of an ocean.

If the things happening before my eyes were precisely "that," in this moment, the other side of the kinescope was a tragedy wrapped in a blue blanket.*

Then, in this moment - this second - what kind of problem was this, exactly?

The horizontal bars the girl had challenged herself to had not been particularly high above the ground, but the real issue was in the way she fell.

In this world, there were people who could get severely injured just from falling off a chair.

Even if it was just equipment meant for training, if they had crashed into a vulnerable body part, it wouldn't be strange if a major injury had been inflicted.

"But really, why does it have to be me..."

I looked around in all directions, but there were no adults in sight.

Having such a huge task forced onto me, I was so anxious my heart literally felt like it was going to explode.

But I had no time to spare, no time to be frightened.

I continued to stare at the ground, where the girl remained still, lying on the dirt that had been dug at by children earlier in the day.

For goodness sake, please don't let it be some sort of serious injury.

As I prayed, I took a step that required all my body's strength to take. And in that moment...

The girl that had been completely still suddenly stood up.

Shoulder-length black hair paired with eyes of the same dark hue, the girl turned my way with an empty look.

Ah, what a relief. I didn't seem as if there were any life-threatening injuries. There seemed to be no blood, and her complexion seemed okay too.

From what I could see, the girl had quite a regular face. One day, a boy will definitely fall in love with her at first sight, and they'll probably build a happy family together.

Ah, really, it's great that she didn't have any long-lasting wounds...

Along with a "click!" sound, my right ankle began to feel as if it had been electrocuted.

Of course, since I had only lived an amount of years that I could count with the fingers on both hands, I hadn't actually been electrocuted or anything before, but there was other way to describe this pain - in the span of one second, the pain instantly flew from the soles of my feet to my head.

Ah, that's right.

Indeed, around 0:000 seconds ago, I had used all the energy in my body to take a step.

I had been too caught up in worrying over the girl, and the angle of the step I had taken seemed to be much farther than it should've been.

The upper half of my body that had been going at a fast speed didn't fit with where my two feet were placed.

From this situation, it is not hard to predict what happened next.

Ah - you, girl, please don't watch me.

"GAHHHHHHHHH!"

As I cried out miserably, almost like I had chosen to use this disgraceful voice, I also began to fall towards the ground in a weird position - as if I had rehearsed all this before.

If this had been some sort of skit in a TV show, I'm sure those sitting behind their TV screens would've burst out laughing at this.

But, I might as well thank those who are polite enough to pretend they are laughing. The most hilarious part was that in the middle of the silent park, I was crouched on the floor, and I had lost my chance to stand up.

My ankle and my body were indeed in pain, but that wasn't something worth mentioning.

The real problem lay in the fact that humans have something that allows them to put pain aside, a terrible feeling called "embarrassment."

Think about it. A person suddenly rushing towards you, then *gracefully* topping over onto the floor while crying out in an unthinkably strange voice - what would you think about them?

...no no no, it's all over. This is terrifying.

Ah, if only I hadn't hastily tried to do unnecessary things.

What do I do. In a situation like this, I would be better off just getting off the ground and running for it.

No, I couldn't. I had hurt my ankle, there was no way I was going to run quickly.

I would definitely run so disgracefully that others would have their hairs stand on end in horror. I would rather not scar the mind of a young girl and leave bad memories.

Since I was already so far gone into this situation, I figured I should just lie still, without moving a muscle, and let time pass.

To be honest, I didn't really want at all to be known, in the girl's mind, as a "mysterious depressing boy that slipped," but now that this had happened, I had to give up on any attempts to save myself.

Ah, this will have to do - but time, please pass by faster.

"Hey, are you okay?"

There was no way I was okay.

My whole body ached, I was embarrassed, how could I...

"Eh?!"

I lifted my head and before me was the girl from just now, her hand outstretched to pull me back up.

Those two large eyes were no longer lifeless like they had been, and from her expression, it didn't seem like she planned on calling the police on me.

"N-no! I'm completely fine! I just tripped over and fell, that's all...a-ahaha..."

I lifted my upper body in panic, and hurriedly forced a smile.

Though it was a relief that this girl didn't hate me, the truth remained as it was - I had fallen over right in front of her.

Though she had her hand reached out towards me, my embarrassment caused me to be unable to easily accept her help.

At the sight of my stricken expression, the girl looked at me questioningly.

“But to me it seemed more as if you had the wind knocked out of you? It looked super painful.”

The girl’s innocent question was like a fuel that made my face heat even more furiously.

Ah, you’re correct. As you said, what happened just now was probably one of the top three biggest falls I’d ever taken in my whole life.

“I’m h-honestly fine! I trip over like this all the time. I’m already used to it, really.”

In reaction to my massive lie, the girl’s face darkened even more.

“All the time? Hm...it still seems like you’re hiding something from me...”

“A-ahaha...”

Oh no, continuing on like this would just be the same as digging my own grave.

Speaking of which, this kid was truly relentless.

Why had she even lain still on the floor if she was this energetic?

Seeing how bright and lively she was, I couldn’t bring myself to tell her “Actually, I fell over because I was trying to save you.”

I had a bad feeling about this.

Though things were not going my way already, if I carried on this conversation, the situation was bound to get worse unless I resolved it.

If rumors regarding “a boy nearby who wanted to create his own sliding technique and then injured himself” spread, that would be bad.

It was about time anyway. The best solution was to retreat as soon as possible, even if it meant that others would consider me a disgusting person.

This was probably going to scar me emotionally, but to fix the issue as fast as possible, there was no other way.

“...fine. I get it, I’ll tell you the truth.” I said while heaving a sigh. Having heard this, the girl stared at me blankly.

“The t-truth?”

“That’s right. Actually...”

Though the embarrassment nearly took over, I made sure this didn’t show on my face, and pulled my mouth a smile in order to force the next line of the script out.

“What you witnessed just now was actually me practicing a secret move, you know. Like those moves that can...defeat all the bad guys in one attack.”

Silence.

So silent, it was almost painful.

The park was suddenly so noiseless it felt as if time had stopped.

It was time, it was time to retreat. It was better to take a deep breath and flee before my red face turned into a burning field of grass.

Then, I was going to go home, and forget everything that had happened together. I

was going to go home, eat dinner, sleep, find love, and live a joyous life from now on. Still, just as I was thinking of how to run away, the girl's response took me by surprise instead.

"S-so I was really right?!" As the girl said this, her curiosity was brightly written all over her face.

"...eh?"

"I-I was wondering if that might've been the case! Y-you're amazing! I see, so that's it...! Because it's a secret move, you don't usually tell others about it, right?!"

Towards the girl that was now five times more intrigued than she had been before, I hurriedly gave an ambiguous answer in panic. "Well, uh, yeah?! I guess?!"



What exactly was this girl so interested in?

Even though I thought I'd struck out for sure, it seemed that I had hit a homerun instead.

Completely ignoring the fact that I was slowly backing away, the girl leaned closer towards me. She stealthily scanned her surroundings, and continued to say strange things.

"T-tell me your secret. I'm actually doing...it too."

"Ah, sorry. What do you mean?"

As I spoke and move back even further to maintain a good distance between the two of us, the girl scanned her surroundings once again and lowered her voice even more.

"Practicing, you know. Practicing a secret move."

The girl had a solemn expression.

But still, this expression was meaningless, because there was no way anything she was saying could be taken seriously at all.

"Huh? Practice? ... you mean, the swings on the horizontal bars?"

That was the only thing that came to my mind.

Still, it seemed as if I had hit bullseye. The girl's face lit up as she said, "S-so you did know!"

What did she mean - I would've been surprised if there were people who didn't know what backward swings on the horizontal bars were.

How was that related to the "secret move" anyway?

No, wait. What if this kid...

"A-are you saying you think swinging on the horizontal bars is some sort of secret attack...?"

"Yep, my dad told me. He said 'As long as you can master the backward swings on the horizontal bars, your enemies will all burn to death.'"

Even though she had said such ridiculous things, the girl's eyes had no doubt in them at all.

"Even just now, I was so close. But I've even done my imagination training, so there definitely won't be a problem next time."

"Ah, I see..."

Aaaah, so that's what happened.

Acting as if she was injured had been part of the girl's imagination training, huh. I see, I see.

"...can I go home now?"

My expression probably couldn't be saved by a smile anymore, and all that was left was my face that had turned as white as a sheet.

Well, that wasn't surprising.

In the mere minutes I had been face-to-face with this girl, how much energy had I used up?

It almost felt as if I'd wasted a few months' worth of energy.

"Eh?! You're just going to go home now?! Even though there's still so much I want to

talk to you about...”

Please, spare me.

In contrast to this girl’s excitement, my body was no longer capable of discussing secret attacks.

“Um, yes. It’s about time for me to go home.”

I smiled as I spoke, trying to be as tactful as I could.

Though the girl made an “mm...” noise reluctantly, at least it seemed that she probably wasn’t going to keep bugging me anymore.

I looked at the clock; it was just past 5:30.

Though this was earlier than the usual time for me to go home, today, I was tasked with the mission of buying a cup.

If I added in the time it was going to take to do that, it was about time to get going.

Using the foot I hadn’t twisted to stand up, I carefully put my weight onto the injured one.

Though, as expected, it did hurt, it appeared that I could still walk.

If it turned out that I wasn’t able stand up, I didn’t even want to imagine what the girl would’ve said to me.

“So um, bye, I’m going now.”

As soon as I said this, I tried to walk off as fast as I could, but still continued her

“mm...”s, her dissatisfaction written all over her face.

Looking closely, those eyes that were staring right back at me were just slightly glistening with tears.

Oh god, I had to leave before the situation got even worse.

As I forced myself to laugh quietly, feeling slightly guilty at the same time, I shuffled towards the exit of the park.

“Hey!”

Just as I had began to move away, behind me, the girl’s voice rang out again.

What now?

I turned my head back a bit so I could see the girl’s face - her troubled expression from before had been switched out for a gentle smile.

“Do you want to talk again tomorrow?”

Seeing her expression and hearing her words, I couldn’t help but panic.

Speaking of which, had I ever made “plans for tomorrow” with someone before?

At least from the memories I could recall, I had never tried it before, not even once.

Oh wait, what was I saying, “at least from the memories I could recall.” I was just a kid.

I hadn’t even lived long enough to have forgotten memories.

“Okay, we’ll meet here again tomorrow,” I said.

I turned back around, and left the park.

Why had I purposely given her cold answers? Even I couldn’t understand.

My ankle hurt every time I took a step on the concrete road, but this pain, caused by the lengthy events that happened today, could for some reason also be considered cute by other people.

Aah, I hope I won’t have to feel more pain tomorrow. As I awkwardly tried to hide how I really felt, I continued to slowly walk ahead.

Before I knew it, the sky had already been dyed in the glowing colours of sunset.

Being able to constantly change the arm my bag rested on to prevent myself from feeling pins and needles in my arms and protecting my injured leg while walking; I’m quite skilled, aren’t I?

“It’s great that I don’t look too bad.”

Having bought a suitable cup from a shop nearest to the station, I was now heading home, dragging my aching leg along.

Even though the pain my leg caused was a bit of a nuisance, but if I could sit down when I got home, I was going to be okay.

Besides, due to the pain in my leg, I had completely forgotten about the state my right cheek was in.

Because of this, when I had been looking for a cup and the shop assistant asked me, “What happened to your face?”, I answered with “Am I really that ugly?”

Seriously, it’s that girl’s fault.

When we meet tomorrow, I have to find a way to get my revenge.

While I bitterly thought this, I continued to walk.

Walking on the familiar path, turning round the familiar corner, crossing the familiar intersection; the place I resided in was right before my eyes.

As usual, I went through the main door, climbed up the iron staircase, and headed towards the furthest room at the back on the second floor.

Probably because this building wasn’t very clean, every since our neighbours moved out last month, the rooms on the second floor had basically all become empty.

Even though Mother had said, “It’s great - now we won’t have to waste our energy fretting over the neighbours,” but to me, someone who spent his nights all alone, it was honestly quite scary.

Actually, I wasn’t very good with anything occult-related in general.

But Mother seemed to really love it, always watching shows like “Special: The Ghosts of Summer” that, by hearing their names alone, were able to give me goose bumps - this was the only thing I wished she would stop doing.

Especially that episode inside the abandoned hospital...*aaaah, I should try not to think about it. Think about happy things, happy things...*

"There aren't really many happy things I can think of, though."

Having walked past the doors of three empty rooms, I could finally see the door to my own house.

Though I didn't know what time I was exactly, judging from where the sun was, I had returned home at the time I normally did.

However, today, this was also the only part of my normal routine that occurred.

"That's strange, the door's open."

I walked in front of the door to my house that was very obviously ajar.

Probably because the design was off, this door didn't lock unless it was closed properly; but of course, Mother knew about this.

"Was it because she was in a hurry?"

Without really thinking about it, I placed my hand on the doorknob.

Even until I had lifted my head after walking into the room, I had still been thinking about pointless things like "Tomorrow, I need to make sure I close the door properly." An idiot like me couldn't be saved, not even with medicine.

When I finally raised my head, there were two adults in the room that was glowing with a deep orange.

One of them was my mother, dressed in her pretty work outfit.

The other was someone I had never seen before, a heavily built man wearing a mask and a dirty shirt.

"Eh..."

Why hadn't Mother gone out for work yet?

Was it Mother, who always refused to bring guests over, who invited this man here?

If so, why was Mother - her mouth blocked with a rag, her hands tied together - lying in tears on the floor?

And why was this man holding Mother's precious jewellery with his dirty hands?

The answer was simple.

But when I finally realized this, it was already too late.

The man's right hand silently shot out, caught hold of my shirt and flung me towards the center of the room.

"Ah!"

Unable to land properly, my back slammed against the floorboards.

My sight blurred, and it felt as if there were a ton of cameras flashing before my eyes at the same time.

I couldn't breathe.

This was the first time in my whole life that I had ever felt pain like his.
My mind was a mess - I merely reached out my right hand to lift my body up, but even that failed.

Lying on the floor, Mother made a noise that seemed like a moan.

What's wrong? What was Mother crying out for?

What exactly was it...

My eyes blurrily darted around the room, and landed on the jewellery that was in the hands of the man who was about to leave.

Yes, it was that.

That jewellery was what Mother was only able to obtain after she worked hard every day.

And this man was about to take it away.

You're right, Mother. If a thing like this was happening, it made sense to scream.

Right at this moment, my right arm finally had the energy to function properly again.

My right arm pressed against the floor, and raised my body upwards.

Having stood, I furiously charged after the man.

"G-give it back...that doesn't....belong to you."

However, the important part was that I was drained to the point where I couldn't think straight.

The man spat angrily, and forcefully grabbed my arm in order to throw me again.

"Ugh...!"

I wasn't able to stay put at all, and flew back towards the floor.

Unable to breathe, my vision fuzzy, I was no longer able to stand up.

I couldn't stop trembling, and after a short while, I heard the sharp sound of metals being scraped.

Though I couldn't see what it was, but from Mother's screams I could guess what the sounds meant.

I thought of my mother, who rarely cooked - and the time when she suddenly bought a set of fairly high-class knives.

As expected, those knives had never been used, and had been placed carefully in the kitchen. The sound from just now was most probably from one of those many knives.

Basically, the man planned on killing me before I tried to attack him again.

After all, it wouldn't take more than one stab to plunge me into eternal darkness. It was a piece of cake.

My face pressed against the floorboards, I could clearly sense that the man's footsteps were getting closer and closer towards me.

Within a few minutes, I was probably going to be dead. Towards this, I did not feel fear at all, nor did I want to resist.

Even so, I could not just continue to lie there.

Using all that I had in me, even though I could only choke out small breaths at a time, I managed to stand up.

Though I had been through so much pain today already, but my body could no longer feel the signals of pain that were sent out.

In the right hand of the man before me was, as I had predicted, a brand new kitchen knife.

At that moment, relying on these two hands of mine to attack this man was probably impossible.

At the same time, all of the plans I thought of were going to cause me pain if they failed.

But that didn't matter; I didn't have to do those things. I just needed a bit of time to make this man unable to move.

I glanced at Mother, tears in her eyes, screaming something indistinguishable at me. *Sorry, Mother. I probably won't be able to get your jewellery back.*

Sorry for being so useless and stupid.

But even if it meant only Mother was going to be able to escape, I was still going to stop this guy.

At least, at least I hope that in the end, even if it's one time, you think "I'm so glad I gave birth to that kid."

I turned to face the man, took a deep breath, and ran towards to the man in my line of sight...

...at least that was that I had originally planned to do.

In a split second, the man's body was already against the wall.

The kitchen knife, no longer new, was deeply plunged into Mother's chest.

The meaning of what I saw didn't register in my mind.

I could only blankly watch my mother writhe in pain, the look in her eyes seeming like she had something to tell me.

The moment the man pulled the knife back out from Mother's body and the fresh blood that splattered everywhere, something in my mind snapped.

Though I could no longer hear anything, I know I definitely yelled something out loud.

But, from the time I thrashed out towards the man - and he stabbed the knife into my abdomen - till the time I fell to his feet, not much time had passed.

I, who had collapsed next to my Mother, felt like I was drowning in ice cold water. A strange feeling engulfed me.

Mother, her mouth gagged, tears streaming down her face, had wanted to tell me something before she had died. But to this day, I still don't know what it was that Mother wanted to tell me.

Before me was a street I had never seen before.

None of the things I knew of were within sight.

This was the 「night.」

Children like me...no, 「children」 like us - did not know what the 「night」 was.

The world of adults, separated by the daytime that overflowed with light.

We were unable to take a single step into it; it was a world that only adults could enter.

It was a world that always took Mother away, a dark world.

...I despised the 「night.」

Every step I took, the sounds of my footsteps against the concrete were reflected by the pitch-black buildings, causing an extremely unpleasant echo.

Every time the neon lights at the edge of my vision flashed, I felt as if I had seen something I shouldn't have, and turned away in embarrassment.

I was so disgusted I felt like I was going to throw up.

Even though I was hit with a wave of a sensation similar to nausea, I still continued to walk along the path that led nowhere.

“That’s not good, why did you come to a place like this?”

From somewhere near me, a faint voice whispered.

“You’re still a child, right? You don’t understand the 「night」 at all. ”

“Don’t talk like you’re looking down on me. You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know everything though. Because I’m an adult.”

I gradually began to dislike the voice near me that seemed to be stuck in place.

“Don’t treat me like a kid.”

As I said this, the whispering voice began to make a weird noise.

The sounds seemed like laughs, but also resembled the hisses of a snake.

“You don’t look it at all. One look is enough to know that you’ve strayed in the wrong direction. Listen up. To put it simply, you don’t understand what the most important thing is.”

The hissing noises grew even louder than before, and the whispers almost seemed attached to me ears.

“The important thing?”

As soon as I said this, the “tap tap tap” sound of the footsteps suddenly came to a halt, despite the fact that I had not stopped walking.

Surprised, I looked all around me - at the flickering neon lights, at the walls of the buildings, even the moon floating in the sky - but there wasn’t a single soul around.

What on earth was happening? I yelled out loud, but couldn’t even hear my own voice.

The shapeless darkness, without even a small sliver of light. Even my body, terrified, seemed to become a part of it.

“You can’t see, can you? Hidden in here are 「lies.」 ”

The whispering seemed to be coming from my own body.

“Adults bury their 「lies」 in the darkness. This is how they protect their own hearts.”

I can’t understand the words being said. I feel sick, it’s too painful. Please let me go.

“Do you understand, young boy? That is the 「night.」 It is the world of adults that you don’t know about.”

...what exactly are adults.

Why does Mother and this world...

“Do you want to know? If you do, then forget about that pure heart of yours.”

Forget about my heart?

“That’s right. In the 「night,」 with its shapeless solitude and shapeless darkness, you don’t need something like that. The only things you need are 「lies.」 ”

I finally began to lose consciousness.

It felt like all of me was being mixed in with the darkness.

Before my fleeting consciousness was completely lost, there was only one phrase, the last thing I heard, carved onto my heart that was slowly disappearing.

“Deceive everything, young boy.”

Yobanashi Deceive 2

Summer had ended.

Even the sickening heat and the sound of cicadas disappeared, leaving me all alone. Lying in a room that was partly a storeroom, today again, I had nothing to do except to live my life.

Every since Mother had passed away, I had been kicked around like a football, and in the end, this was the room given to me.

The family that had adopted me were apparently distant relatives of my mother, but our relationship was extremely bare, almost as if we weren't related by blood.

Two months had passed.

Though I had been lucky enough to survive, not once had I thought about dying. It was the first time realized - even my reason to live or die only existed under the requirement that my mother too, existed.

Even if I died here, what was I going to be able to do?

No matter what I did, I wasn't going to see Mother again, so there was no point.

Regardless, the fact that I was still my mother's son would never change.

If I, who had luckily survived, ended up causing trouble for others...if I randomly died and caused trouble, I was going to be sorry for Mother.

I was not going to be able to cope with something like that.

I was going to live a normal life, and repeat these meaningless days.

At that time, that was the most reasonable thing to do.

As I lay there, I unintentionally began to stare at the ceiling. From the open window, a cool breeze blew into the room.

At the very least, I wasn't going to go on like this forever.

I had to become strong, I had to work, I had to eat.

I had to hurry up and become an adult...

The moment I thought of the word 「adult」, something in my heart seemed to be shifting

Shivering, I sat up, but I didn't have any trouble breathing, nor did I feel any pain in my chest.

“What's going on...”

Was I not supposed to have taken the risk to open the windows?
It was going to be bad if it was a cold.
Honestly, I didn't think this couple really liked me.
If I ended up getting a fever, they definitely weren't going to take it well.
Just in case, I concluded that it was safer to take some cold medicine - but how was I going to do it?
Speaking of which, I recalled that when I had been briefly given a tour around the house, I had been told where the cold medicine was.
Though I didn't know where it was, but since I had been told where it was, it meant that taking it wasn't going to be a problem.
"Hmm~...I guess I'll go and ask."
Asking for permission and using this as a chance to ask where it was, I was going to kill two birds with one stone. Before the cold got worse, I was going to crush it.
I stood up, and left the room.

Compared to the house I used to live in, this house was much more refined and luxurious.
But then again, this house probably didn't exceed the standards of a typical house most families had. Even the thought that this house was "luxurious" was simply a result of the way I had been brought up. If someone told me "this is just normal," I surely wouldn't be able to refute their claims.
But still.
Though I'd never once said this - nor did I have any intention of ever saying it - the decorations around the house and the paintings hung up in the hall really didn't seem very special to me.
Walking in the hallway, I inevitably ended up facing a sculpture so bizarre, it sent shivers down my back.
Perhaps this was unfortunately a sculpture that someone like me would never understand.
Though I couldn't pin the blame on the sculptor, as the one who had to clean it everyday, I really couldn't help but complain, saying things like "Why couldn't you make it simpler?!"
Pass the sculpture, I opened the door to the kitchen, and stepped inside.
It was around dinnertime, so I assumed my aunt* would be inside, which would've been convenient, but I seemed that my predictions had been wrong.
My aunt was nowhere to be found, and from the mountain of dishes and cutlery waiting to be washed in the sink, I could see that the preparations for dinner hadn't even begun yet.
"She's not here...huh. What should I do?"
Regardless, I wasn't stupid enough to go out of my way to look for my aunt in her room.

But thinking about how I'd have to wait here in the kitchen until she came made me a little uncomfortable too.

Thankfully, my memory of where the cold medicine was clearer now that I was actually in the kitchen.

If I remembered correctly, the medicine was in the drawer of the cabinet.

Being overly cautious also made me uncomfortable, so I decided to open the drawer, take the tablet if it was there, and then immediately return to my room.

Standing near the back of the kitchen, I strode towards the fancy cabinet.

It would've been good if I just looked where I was going and walked, but for some reason, my eyes were drawn towards the stack of cutlery.

And in that moment, I saw the knife.

That knife was an exact replica of the knife the man had used to stab Mother on that day.

A chill ran down my spine as my heart rate sped up.

Of course, this wasn't actually the knife that had taken my mother away from me. As proof, there were plenty of signs that this knife had been used before.

Slowly, I reached my hand out towards the knife.

Holding the knife by its handle, I turned it around in my hand, seeing how heavy it was.

Even compared to the rest of the cutlery in this house, it was clear that nothing could compare to this knife. It must've been very expensive.

"...how could you, Mother? Even though you bought such an expensive thing, how could you just die without using it even once?"

The day she bought the set of knives, Mother had been strangely talkative.

Even though it seemed that the day after, she'd completely forgotten about it, I still remembered what my mother said that day, her eyes sparkling - "Using these, we'll be able to make really good food!"

— — As these thoughts filled my mind, my heart filled with loneliness.

A recollection of Mother's face, voice and smell suddenly hit me all at once.

Mother...

"AAAAHHHHHHH!!!"

I was at a loss for words the moment I heard the piercing scream.

Horried and staring at me from the door was the silhouette of my aunt, who had been on her way to prepare dinner.

From her expression, it looked as if she had seen a monster, her terror written all over her face.

Oh no.

Had I scared her because I was holding the knife?

"Ah, I'm very sorry! I was just taking a look at it, that's all!"

I frantically put the knife back on top of the towel, and showed her my empty hands.

Of course I had no intention of attacking her at all, so this was the best thing to do. She was hopefully reassured now. If I frightened her and she reported it to someone, that was going to be bad.

And yet...

What I had done did not calm my aunt down but had caused her face grow even paler than it had been - she was so scared, her whole body began to tremble.

No matter how I looked at it, there was clearly something wrong. What was she so afraid of?

Just as I was about to gently ask her if she was alright, my aunt, in a voice that was almost a scream, began to speak.

"W-why are you...d-do you really resent us that much?"

Resentment...there was no way I felt that.

I was extremely thankful that they even let me live here.

"Ah, um, please calm down first..."

I didn't understand what she was trying to say, but I wanted to clear up any misunderstandings first, and took a few steps towards my aunt.

Besides, I had nothing in my hands, no matter how one looked at it, there was no way it had looked intentional...

"Don't...! D-don't come any closer!"

My hard work had been all in vain; the moment she screamed this, my aunt fled towards the corridor.

"Aah! P-please wait!"

Without moving from where I was, I yelled this, but before I had even finished my sentence, she had already opened the door, and ran off somewhere.

Click! Only the sound of the door closing echoed around the room.

Oh no. No no no.

This was terrible.

I'd had no intention of doing it at all, but I had caused a huge misunderstanding.

"W-what do I do?! Aaaah..."

The worst thing was, even if I hung my head and apologised, time wasn't going to turn back.

Aaah, why did I do such unnecessary things again.

If only I had stayed obediently in my room.

If only I hadn't tried to do something as stupid as find the cold medicine, this wouldn't have happened...

Dizzy, I turned back and glared at the knife.

It was this thing's fault too.

How much misfortune was this thing going to bring me?

Looking at the elegant knife, glinting in the light as if it was mocking me, a rage I couldn't oppress began to rise within.

".....hah?!"

Facing this strange sight, I threw the knife away in horror, and sat on the floor,

shaken.

I lightly slapped my own face, but there seemed to be nothing wrong. As expected, there was no way for me to accept this without checking again.

In a frenzy, I ran out of the kitchen, passed by the odd statue, and dashed into the bathroom.

At that moment, I stopped dead at my own reflection in the mirror above the sink.

“W-why?”

Reflected in the mirror had not been my own face that I was accustomed to seeing, but the face of my mother.

If this truly was my reunion with Mother, I would’ve most likely ran straight into her arms without a second thought.

But there was no way that was possible. Mother was already dead.

Despite the fact that I was witnessing the impossible, my mind was somehow calmly taking in everything.

I leaned in towards the mirror, and tried pinching my cheek.

Undoubtedly, it was my mother’s face that I was seeing, but the pinches I could feel on my cheek told me otherwise.

I moved in even closer to the mirror.

I tried opening and closing my mouth, and as if it was trying to imitate me, Mother’s face in the mirror moved too.

Unmistakably, this was me.

I couldn’t even begin to imagine what had caused a problem like this to occur; I only knew that right now, I looked like my mother.

The moment I deduced this, something else clicked in my mind.

Just then, it had been this face that caused my aunt to flee in fear.

If that was the case, I suddenly understood why she had acted like that.

Imagine walking into the kitchen to make dinner and seeing a supposedly dead relative standing there with a knife - it made sense that she was terrified. Though, if it had been me, I would’ve just run straight into her arms.

Regardless, the important part was deciding what I was going to do from here on.

Doing something like looking into the mirror and saying “I really miss you” was not only kind of scary, but creepy too.

Instead of doing that, I had to go back to normal as soon as possible.

From how my aunt reacted, she probably went and called the police; there was no way I could continue to idly stand here and wait.

At the same time, if anyone made a huge deal out of “seeing a dead relative in my kitchen,” the police force wasn’t going to act immediately.

Which meant I still had a bit of time.

Once again, I looked closely at Mother's face, reflected in the mirror, but there was obviously nothing there like a button that I could just press to return to normal.

Speaking of which, when exactly had I become like this?

The first time I picked up the knife, it had definitely been my face reflected in the blade.

Not long after that, my aunt had already come in screaming, which meant it had occurred in that short period of time.

And in that moment, I had turned into this because...

"N-no way..."

Closing my eyes, I decided to test my theory.

The things I had done at that time -

I had "recalled" Mother's looks, voice and smell.

Then if I just "recalled" it again, wouldn't I be able to go back to my normal self?

If this world had a method even idiots could think of that allowed us to casually change the way we looked, I'm sure it would cause a huge commotion.

Which is why I didn't have very high expectations for this idea of mine.

But I decided try it anyway, so I focused my mind.

Recall the looks, voice and smell.

...around 30 seconds passed.

Though I had no idea how long the ideal waiting time was, I opened my eyes anyway.

"Okay...ehhh?! Seriously?!"

My mother that had been standing on the other side of the mirror vanished completely.

And in her replacement, was the girl I had met in the park around two months ago.

Her body, her skin, even those eyes - this was, without a doubt, what I had imagined about the girl.

"W-what even is this, it's amazing...!"

Had I ever thought of something as this "interesting" before?

No, I was sure that there wasn't.

This strange event happening before my eyes stirred my curiosity.

Not knowing what was going to happen next, I had no way of suppressing my expectant feelings for the things that were going to occur.

The girl's eyes reflected in the mirror were shining, as if she was talking about a "secret attack."

I see, this is how you felt back then.

If this was how you felt, I could now understand why you were so desperate to continue our conversation.

Oh right, though I had made plans to meet the girl that day, I ended up being unable to see her.

If I happened to see her again, I was definitely going to use this power to surprise

her.

Just as I, in the girl's body, was skipping around in front of the sink, I heard a crisp "click" sound from inside the house.

My whole body stiffened, and I began to break out in hateful sweat.

Listening closely, I heard my aunt say, "There was a suspicious person! Right here..." I see - she did well, didn't she.

She was able to quickly bring the police here by saying that there was a "suspicious person" rather than "a ghost."

This wasn't a good time to start playing around.

No - it had never been a good time, and now the situation had gotten serious.

Thankfully, it didn't seem like they planned on just barging in.

I had to use this chance to return to normal. Though I was sure my aunt was going to be confused when she saw that there was no one in the kitchen, this was the only way.

I'll figure a way to make up for this afterwards.

Shutting my eyes tight, all I could see was pitch black.

Recall it...!

"...it's not working at all."

I was furiously sweating.

This was bad. I couldn't do the most important part at all: recalling "myself."

In all these years of my life, how could I have been *this* ignorant?

Now that I thought about it, I had never really taken many photos, nor had I really looked in the mirror very often.

I definitely hadn't been aware of my own voice, much less my own scent.

Hope filling my heart, I opened my eyes - but even praying was useless, and reflected in the mirror was still the girl, her face pale.

Sensing the nearing footsteps out in the corridor, her face became even stiffer.

What if, like this, I got caught by the police?

There was surely nothing that was going to trouble the girl more than this.

Though I realized it was convenient that I could change into other people, it was impossible for me, dense and an idiot, to be able to focus.

"A-anyway, I have to hide first...!"

Inside the bathroom, there was a separate room for the shower.

Hiding there wasn't a very good idea, but it was still better compared to being caught just like this.

Having made my decision, I immediately began to act on it.

I frantically headed towards the shower room.

"Ow!!"

There was an excruciating pain in my hip.

I didn't know whether or not it was because of my voice, but the footsteps seemed to immediately close in on me, and holding my breath, I dove into the shower room. As expected, a few policemen burst into the room. Watching them scrutinize me, still in the form of the girl, I grew cold.

How was I going to apologise to this girl.

It was okay for them to stare at me, but if the existence of this power was revealed, I was no doubt going to become the culprit of this case.

If that happened, then I was definitely going to end up in a very difficult situation.

My heart was filled to the brim with regret. Ah, exactly how reckless was I.

Just as I was despairing over my own stupidity, one of the policemen reached their hand out towards me.

"You, are you okay? What happened?"

"Ah, it's nothing, nothing happened. I just happened to slip..."

I simply told him the innocent truth.

"I see. Uh, did you see anyone?"

At this point, I had a sudden realization, but remained calm and said, "I didn't see anyone..."

As I finished my sentence, I saw my aunt behind the policemen, trembling in fear.

It was over. There was no way out now.

My aunt was surely startled by the appearance of this stranger, this girl.

I was going to be taken somewhere, then interrogated, then...just thinking about it made me scared.

But in contrast to my thought, my aunt said something I had not expected at all.

"Shuuya-kun, what are you doing?"

"Eh?"

Though it wasn't as if being called by my name was really a strange thing, but in this situation, this word was extremely important.

I frantically stood and snuck a glance in the mirror - and reflected in the mirror, teary-eyed, was my original body.



“S-Shuuya-kun? What on earth are you doing?”

I ignored my aunt, and pondered what it had been that allowed me to change back.

“...it’s pain.”

This conclusion I had come to almost felt extremely ironic.

The pain I had felt in my hip when I tripped.

What I had felt towards that pain was, most definitely, was ‘reminiscence.’

Though I had always believed that I was used to pain, it seemed that I had been completely wrong.

‘Pain’ was the only part of ‘me’ that I could feel; the sole fragment of my ‘identity.’

To only be able to identify myself through pain, how little interest did I have in myself?

Everyone else present worriedly looked at me, but I simply laughed at this absurd truth I had discovered.

...the power to disguise myself and deceive others.

Compared to how I felt when I had first encountered this scary ability, I now - to my own surprise - welcomed it.

Yobanashi Deceive 3

A heavy atmosphere filled the car.

While the temperature was kept at a pleasant range, thanks to the air conditioning, the lack of any casual conversation made the situation highly unpleasant.

The only sign of life within the car was provided by the rhythmically flickering shadows cast by the telephone poles on the roadside.

Surreptitiously avoiding Auntie’s notice, I gave a small sigh.

I was never very good with traveling in moving vehicles. Well... maybe “not very good” was an understatement. A massive understatement.

If the motion was gentler, like a see-saw or something, it’d be ok, but cars and buses were the bane of my existence.

It's probably partially because I've rarely gotten the chance to ride on them, but maybe there really was something wrong with my inner ear.

Speaking of which, there was one time when Mom impulsively took me to ride something called a "roller coaster." That had been a horrible experience.

High speed, twists and turns... To be honest, the entire process really was pretty meaningless, but it really gave its all.

Over the course of the ride, I had felt something terrible surging up from within me, and I'd steeled myself with the thought that "I'd rather die than subject myself to that kind of embarrassment."

Thankfully, the worst-case scenario never occurred, but I never want to go on one of those again for the rest of my life.

...Anyway, it's been almost forty minutes since we've left the house.

The car sped onwards, towards the special facility that would be my new home from now on.

As for the reason why it came to be like this, I could think of a few, but the main cause was probably still what happened a few days ago.

Ever since I had first used my power, Auntie had clearly been avoiding me. Of course, I never told her about my powers, nor were they discovered by anyone in the family.

Still, Auntie seemed to misunderstand in a troublesome way. Ever since the next day, the rather extravagant house was filled with self-proclaimed psychics and exorcists.

Though all that they said just sounded like empty mysticism, Auntie seemed to believe them, and wholeheartedly placed her faith into the veracity of their words.

And as expected, I became the "root of all evil," and the aftermath was easy to imagine.

But then again, I'd planned on leaving anyway if I was causing trouble to the family. After all, I had no emotional attachment to them.

All I really did feel was a sense of guilt.

The trouble that I'd caused them won't be easily eliminated, especially by my efforts alone.

Though I did feel that I should find some way to compensate, nothing at all came to mind.

As I sighed once more, the rumbling of the engine ceased along with the motion of the car.

I glanced around, but Auntie immediately said to me, "Hurry, get off. We're here." As such, I pushed open the door and stepped out.

Outside the car, we were met with a large, beige manor. Probably the "facility" Auntie spoke of.

According to her, it seemed to be a place that took in orphaned children like me.

As she was explaining to me, she had forced out an unnatural smile, saying that I would be happier if I lived with kids around my age.

But, as I saw it... there really was nothing more troublesome than interacting with kids around my age.

Having had no real friends since I was born, the manor before my eyes seemed no different from a zoo.

I closed the car door, and Auntie locked it with a *click* before looking down at her watch.

"I'll go in to speak with the management. Wait here for a moment, ok?"

"Huh? Ah, ok."

Auntie quickly disappeared into the building, leaving me standing there alone.

Having been used to the warm interior of the car, I was suddenly assaulted by the cold wind. Even though I hadn't planned on thinking in such a way, I still began to feel a little forlorn.

As I was caught up in such hazy emotions, the next bout of wind quickly brought my body temperature down even further.

"S-so cold... How long do I have to wait here, anyway?"

Not being particularly physically resilient, I eventually started to shiver under the frigid conditions.

It'd be alright if Auntie would be back in the next few minutes, but if I had to wait ten or twenty more, that would be a different matter.

Speaking of which, if Auntie was going to go alone, why did I have to get out of the car? The logic was a little odd.

Even if I wanted to return to the car, Auntie had already locked the door, so that wasn't a possible course of action.

But if I continued standing here without doing anything, I'll freeze to death.

I took a few steps in place, but the heat refused to remain in my body, and continued to slowly dissipate along with the ticking minutes.

".....No, no, this isn't good, it's too cold...! I'll really die if this goes on...!"

I mumbled uselessly as I took another long, searching glance around. But of course, I wouldn't be so lucky as to just find a heater out of the blue like that.

If I had known this would happen, I would have put on something warmer. Even though I wouldn't have anything as nice as a down jacket or anything, but even at least a pair of gloves...

As I was lost in thought, a scarf suddenly appeared before my eyes, as though it had been thrust toward me.

Aah... At this point of desperation, anything was salvation. Just as I was about to accept the scarf with a joyful expression, I realized the peculiarity of the situation.

In the blink of an eye... truly, in less than an instant, a person had suddenly appeared right in front of me.

"Uwaaaaaah!" I let out a sharp yelp, involuntarily taking several steps back.

Having retreated slightly, I could now see that the one holding out the scarf was a girl, about my age.

She was wearing a large pair of purple earmuffs and a very warm-looking coat. The image was almost perfect, save for the mess of short hair, whipped about by the wind.

She almost looked like a boy at first, but from the looks of her skirt, she had to be a girl.

The short haired girl shook slightly in surprise as I retreated, and immediately glared over with furious eyes.

“I was just trying to be nice...”

“Eh...”

As I floundered for a response, the girl cast me a discontent look before angrily saying, “It’d be gross if you just died right next to me, so that’s why I wanted to lend this to you!”

“Ah, um, t-thank you very much. Ahaha, then, I’ll borrow it.....”

I reached out towards the scarf, but the girl merely gave a grunt of contempt, as though saying “you should have accepted from the start.”



...It must have been an illusion, right? She really did seem to have appeared out of thin air.

Even though I was somewhat concerned, it really was best to accept the kindness silently in this situation.

I took a careful look, seeing an unexpected brand marking on the scarf.

I remember Mom had a watch with the same brand. It was, apparently, ridiculously expensive, so Mom had always placed it securely in a drawer, rarely taking it out.

"Er~ I can't borrow something like this..." I said with a doleful smile, and the girl's expression turned unabashedly disgruntled.

"I was just..."

"No, no, I really am grateful!! It's just, this is really expensive, isn't it? You shouldn't be lending it out to people so easily."

Hearing this, the girl had a blank look on her face.

"This is... expensive?"

"Huh, you didn't know? Um, well... a-anyway! I'm fine!"

I pushed the scarf back towards her, and she took it from me with a look of extreme discontent.

After a moment's deliberation, however, she reached out, wrapping the scarf directly around my neck.

"W-why!?"

"I'll lend it to you anyway. I've been looking at you for a long time, and you really do look cold."

She was a surprisingly stubborn child.

I wasn't extremely willing to accept this gesture, but she had already wrapped it around me so it can't be helped.

My body started warming up bit by bit, starting from the neck, which was another reason why I didn't want to take it off and return it to her immediately.

“Ah~ Um, thank you... This really is nice, isn't it?”

It was really warm, probably because it was a brand product.

Even though I didn't really understand the value of things like this, I would guess this is something that was worth spending a lot of money to buy.

Just as I was submerged in this warm feeling of happiness, I suddenly remembered what the girl had said. *A long time...* I opened my eyes wide to stare at her.

“Speaking of which, you said you'd been looking at me for a long time, but from where?”

“Huh? What do you mean? I was right beside...”

The short haired girl seemed to realize something, and let out a soft, agonized moan.

“Ah, d-did I say something I shouldn't have...?” I asked carefully, worried I had encroached upon a sensitive subject, but the girl merely replied “nothing like that” in a stiff manner.

“People always say that about me. ‘Since when have you been here?’, stuff like that.” She had a consternated expression on her face.

I see. From what I've gleaned from this short interaction, she was a quiet girl. She was probably just easily overlooked.

“Ahh, just now, it also looked like you appeared out of thin air! I was so surprised~ I almost thought you were a ghost!”

I let out a laugh, looking to her in a joking manner.

However, in stark contrast, her face quickly reddened, and she let out a soft whimper, tears immediately beginning to roll down her cheeks.

Of course, this was the first time I've ever made a girl cry.

“Aaaaaaaa!! I'm sorry! That's not true! I was lying just now!! I wasn't thinking about anything like that at all!!”

I hastily tried to backpedal, but it was too late.

The short haired girl started to cry, and in between her sniffles, she threw out belligerent accusations of “not lying,” “won't forgive you,” “never ever.”

Dammit. I did something stupid again.

Mom's voice suddenly sounded in my mind. *Girls are very delicate*, she had said.

So is this what she meant by delicate?

"Um, er....."

And this was occurring right in front of the building I'm supposed to be calling "home" from now on. What am I doing?

If someone saw this, I'll definitely be marked a problematic child even before stepping into the facility.

I quickly glanced around to check that there was no one around. Right, left... as I turned my head back towards the right, something surprising happened.

The girl who had been crying for such a long time before my eyes had abruptly disappeared.

"Eh!? Since... when...?"

This was even more shocking than when she had suddenly appeared.

If it was because she had decided to run away from me in disgust, I should still be able to see her retreating figure from this distance.

And besides, her shoes weren't made of sponges. Even if she ran away, I'll be able to hear her footsteps.

But no matter where I looked, there wasn't even the slightest trace of her presence.

This was way too weird. The girl had left my sight with such speed that "disappeared" was really the only word for it.

"N-no way...?"

I rubbed my eyes in disbelief.

"...What do you mean no way?"

The voice made me jump once more.

In the instant that I had brought my hand up to my eyes, the girl had appeared once more in the exact same spot she had been standing.

Normally, I'd probably yell out in surprise. The only reason I hadn't done so already was because, apparently, my brain was incapable of quickly reacting to such a sudden twist.

But I guess it was good that I didn't.

If I started yelling again in front of the still crying girl, I'd probably get slapped into oblivion.

As I was thinking this, however, an even more unbelievable sight met my eyes, causing me to grit my teeth sharply.

Her feet... strictly speaking, her legs, exposed from the knee down below her skirt, was beginning to turn transparent.

I could no longer stop myself from letting out a sharp noise of fear and surprise.

I was joking when I had said "ghost," but now that word floated back to the surface of my mind with a vengeance.

...Hold on a second.

So could it be... this girl really was *that kind* of thing? And that, seeing how I was about to freeze to death anyway, she had approached me, thinking of us as comrades?

And even under those circumstances, I had so casually asked about her identity like that. No wonder she got angry–

"You're thinking that I'm a ghost, aren't you?"

Hearing the girl's words, I felt like I was also close to tears.

A frigid chill had already spread up my spine, but I still had to try my best to maintain some vestige of dignity.

"A-ahaha! C-come on! I-I-I said I wasn't thinking of anything like that! I mean, we're friends, right?"

As expected, my words made no sense whatsoever.

My legs were still shaking uncontrollably. Perhaps she could already detect my fear.

"Friends...?"

The girl sniffled once more, asking me.

“T-that’s right! How should I say this... we’re the same, right? Er~ I mean...”

What was I talking about? *Same*? My legs were still firmly attached to my body, while my conversational partner was floating in the air. What kind of idiot am I?

Unsurprisingly, her gaze remained sharply fixed on me, clearly unimpressed by my lies.

No good... At this rate, I’m going to get killed by this spirit or phantom or whatever she was.

Aah, if I’d know this was going to happen, I’d have asked for a couple of those weird exorcist’s talismans.

To be honest, I feared what the ghost would do to me more than the possibility of death.

Just as I was about to burst into tears from extreme fear, I suddenly had an idea.

“O-oh yeah! Hey, I’ll show you my power too! And then! We’ll be friends! Right?!”

With tears in my eyes, I gave this desperate plea, but the girl only looked a little taken aback as she muttered, “Huh? I don’t want to see... What are you talking about?”

I knew that if I back off now, I’m done for; and as such, I pressed on. “Come on, just let me show you! Ok? You won’t regret it!” I was rambling at this point.

Even though the girl’s expression was still filled with suspicion, I entrusted everything to my “power,” closing my eyes and beginning to concentrate.

One day, because I had just found out about the power, and also because I didn’t want it to be discovered by Auntie and the others, I had tried to use it a few times.

As long as I could imagine the shape, smell and sound in my mind’s eye, I could turn into that form. I realized this, along with several other points, as I was experimenting out of curiosity.

First, I couldn’t turn into anything that wasn’t alive.

I had concentrated on “turning into an airplane to fly,” but the mirror had only reflected my somewhat foolish pose, with my outstretched arms and neck.

Either way, I'd never been on, or even seen, an airplane before, so it would've been more surprising if I *had* been able to turn into one.

And besides, even if such a thing were possible, what was I thinking, turning into an airplane inside the house?

If I had wrecked it, what would I compensate with? That thought had surprised even myself.

Afterwards, my repeated practice resulted in one conclusion: I could only turn into something alive, with a clear form, and that I had actually come face-to-face with before.

To give a rough summary, it was a power of changing my outward appearance in the eyes of everyone, including myself.

Though I say this, my experimentation was still limited. There were still many unexplored points, but in this desperate situation, I really could only rely on this power.

I need to imagine someone that this child would like...

.....Sorry for using your form again and again, Park Girl*.

I opened my eyes to find the short haired girl staring at me, dumbfounded, with her mouth hanging open.

Looks like I did well.

"H-how's this? Isn't it pretty cool?" I asked nervously. The girl suddenly began trembling.

Aah, was that still no good? I couldn't do anything more. If this spirit...

As a mantra began running through my mind out of extreme fear, the girl finally spoke.

"It is pretty cool...!"

Her eyes sparkled in a similar way mine had when I had first discovered I could use this power.

"R-really!? That's good..." I let out a breath of relief, abandoning the mantra in my head.

It seems she was quite impressed. At this rate, I probably won't have to worry about being killed by a ghost.

"H-how did you, this...!"

"Er, how should I put it... I guess... I can turn into a form that I like, or something like that?"

As I spoke, the girl let out an awed "oooh...!"

Yes, this was going well. This child's guard was unexpectedly loose. If I continue to entertain her, she'll probably let me go.

"Show me something else."

".....Eh?"

She must really be impressed with my power. The girl didn't even blink as she stared at me in anticipation of my next change.

"Ah, ok! Then I'll change again! Er..... what should I go for?"

Though I said this, in all honesty, the only other person I could immediately turn into was Mom.

Sorry, Mom, I'm still scared of being killed by this ghost. One more time...!

"Then, here I go."

"M-mmhm."

I closed my eyes, imagining Mom's form, her smell, her voice...

Compared to Park Girl, Mom was even easier to recall, though I did feel sad whenever I thought about her.

"...How's this?"

I opened my eyes, and was met with another joyous "oooh~!" from the girl.

Perhaps due to the amazement, she even started clapping slowly for me.

"Ahaha, ah, thank you~ thank you~..."

I inclined my head slightly, a little embarrassed.

Well, it looks like this child was unexpectedly lively. At least, her previous, darkened expression had disappeared.

It seems even ghosts came in different forms.

If she was like this, perhaps I really could become friends with her.

“Huh?”

I suddenly looked towards her knees, which had sprouted legs again at some point.

“Hmm, what? What’s wrong with my legs?”

The girl tilted her head, a questioning look on her face.

“Er... no, nothing.”

“Huh~ Hmm, that’s weird.”

Her expression seemed to say “oh well,” and she didn’t pursue the topic further.

I wanted to remark something like, “If you’re talking about ‘weird’, doesn’t that go for both of us?” But then again, I didn’t want to risk hurting the “delicate heart” of the girl once more.

“Then, alright.” The girl said, sticking out a hand.

“Yeah?”

“Not ‘yeah?’, come on... friends! We’re friends, so we should shake hands.” She stuck out her hand even further.

I guess so... I’d forgotten in my desperation, but I did say that.

“Ah, yes, you’re right. Er...”

I really only had to take her hand, but I hesitated, and seeing this, the girl grabbed my hand herself, forcing the handshake.

“Ok, now we’re friends.”

As she spoke, she broke into a smile. As for me, I was so flustered that I felt like fire was going to erupt from my face.

That’s right. This is my first friendship that I’ve ever had.

Now I have a friend too. The kind of friend that I could play together with, the kind I'd always yearned for in the park.

"Y-yeah!"

I turned towards her, smiling as well. This was the moment that the short haired "ghost" girl became my "Friend #1."

"Speaking of which, what's your name?"

The girl asked me, and I let out a noise of realization.

I guess it doesn't really count as a friendship if we don't even know each other's names.

"And also, when are you going to let go of my hand?" She asked idly right after.

Extremely embarrassed, I pulled my hand back quickly, covering it up with a lighthearted "A-ahaha, name, name~"

"I-I'm Shuuya. Kano Shuuya."

Hearing my name, the girl gave a soft "hmm..." as she nodded.

"H-how about you?"

Now it was her turn to answer.

"I'm Kido–"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

As the girl was about to answer, a somewhat familiar scream sounded from the direction of the facility's front door. I turned, and as expected, there stood Auntie, wearing the shocked expression from before.

...Ah. I'd forgotten to turn back.

"W-why would you tail us all the way here!? Y-you're after me, aren't you!? Aren't you!? Aaaah..."

Auntie let out a string of shrill questions before her legs gave way, and she crumpled to the ground.

From within the building, there were sounds of “what’s wrong!?” and “someone screamed!”

Oh no. This was not good. Not good at all.

“Hey, who’s this?”

I ignored the girl’s question, instead trying my best to think of a way out of this situation as I broke into a cold sweat.

And then, it came to me. The fastest, but cruelest way. This was the only possibility.

“C-can you punch me, hard!?”

I grabbed the girl’s shoulders, forcing out a smile.

“.....Huh?”

Her expression immediately turned frigid once more, shooting her cold gaze toward me.

Though, anything was alright at this point. As long as I could turn back to my own body...

Within the building, there were now shouts of “someone fainted!” The footsteps were growing closer, fast.

“Hey!? Come on!? Don’t worry about how hard, ok!? Just hit me! Come on!!”

The girl’s features had tightened completely, with no trace of her former smile.

But even then, I continued to shake her shoulders, and her expression suddenly changed.

The next moment, she turned a glare on me, completely filled with killing intent.

Aah. Goodbye, my first friend. It was only a short time, but it had been a wonderful memory.

A loud, crisp *slap* resounded throughout the facility.

And thus was the first, completely unmomentous (and certainly not the last) blow I received from the girl known as “Kido.”

Yobanashi Deceive 4

The dim orange light fixture illuminated the tidy room.

Tidy was a nice way of putting it, but in reality, it was because the room was very sparsely decorated.

A small LCD television, a large checkered table. The rest was a couple of cushions around the table and the few children's books on the shelf. There was also a few colored cubbies to store our clothing - overall, the room was unfeeling and methodical in such a way.

At the end of the first floor of the single-rooms building - "Room 107".

Sitting on the slightly dirty lower bunk of one of the two bunk beds placed in the room - my bed - we were holding an uneasy review meeting as usual.

Today's topic was - "How should we, known as the 'monsters' of this care facility, work to clear our names?"

...Though I say it's "today's topic," to be honest it's the same topic as yesterday, and the day before as well.

But even today, neither of the others seemed to give any indication of speaking, nor did they respond to my question of "so what do you two think?" In the dim light, the silence stretched on in minutes.

"Ahh~ Really, what on earth can we do~?"

I couldn't help letting out these words of surrender. Hearing it, Seto merely clutched his pillow tightly against his chest, looking as though he were about to start crying.

"It must be my fault, after all. I'm very sorry..."

"No, it's not just you. Don't say things like that. Also, don't use keigo."

Seto's weak words were immediately cut short by Kido, and his shoulders shook once in alarm before letting out a small, whispered apology, burying his face in the pillow.

Seto always cried at the drop of a hat, almost as if he were some combination of a baby animal and a toddler.

He cried when he fell down, when he was hungry, when night approached... he'll even cry for no real reason at times. That was the most striking characteristic of Seto Kousuke, my "Friend #2" that I met at this facility.

Though I personally felt we should probably be more gentle when talking to Seto about these matters, Kido didn't seem to really care.

Throwing out a stiff "hm," she grabbed the cat's cradle from beside her, beginning to construct the Tokyo Tower with the string.

I felt it wouldn't end well if the conversation was simply left like this, and hastened to mediate between them.

"It's fine, and besides, I mean... Seto's also thinking a lot about things in his own way..."

".....Um, I'm sorry, I'm not thinking about many things at all."

Seto mumbled with his face still buried in the pillow, completely disregarding my attempts to speak up for him.

Conversely, Kido looked up with an agitated expression, silently releasing a sense of pressure as she muttered "I *said* no keigo." Seto jumped again, shutting his mouth tightly. In an instant, we were back where we had started.

I heaved a sigh, leaning against the pile of blankets beside me.

It's probably no good today, either. At the rate things were going, we'd just end up all falling asleep like usual. That conclusion was pretty much within sight.

From the day I had arrived here, several months had flown by.

Somehow, this time had seemed busier than the two months I'd spent with Auntie's family.

On that day, having gained a red hand-shaped mark on my face as soon as I arrived, I'd been worried about what would happen to me. Thankfully, the days here have been relatively peaceful up till now.

Speaking of which, I had been surprised when I learned that the girl who had given me that mark, "Kido," was also an orphan who had come here under similar circumstances as me.

It'd be fine if that was the extent of it, but I had been even more shocked to find out that we'd be living in the same room.

It seems the rooms were normally separated by gender, but because the other rooms were all full, and we were still kids anyway, this had been the final arrangement.

I've heard of the notion before, but that was the first time I've ever felt that "destined meetings" really did exist.

To add on - the reason that I started calling her "Kido" was because I'd only heard her last name before we were interrupted. And then, after what had happened during our first meeting, she refused to even talk to me, thinking of me as some kind of pervert.

I didn't want to just let my "Friend #1" escape so easily, so I continuously followed after her, calling her "Kido-san" over and over. When she *finally* said "there's no need for the -san," I had been so overwhelmed by emotions that I'd almost started crying. But then, she never told me her first name in the month to come, so her name became "Kido" to me.

And curled up and awaiting the two of us in this room had been Seto, who had lived in this room from the very beginning.

His personality was different from Kido's stiff coldness. Although he also didn't talk much, one day he suddenly began speaking at length to me, as though trying to cheer me up as Kido continued to ignore me.

He said that he had been in this facility since birth.

That he didn't have a single friend, and was even often bullied by the other inhabitants here.

That his only friend, a dog named Hanako had died last year... etc. He told me these things with tears streaming down his face. No matter how you looked at it, as far as "cheering me up" goes, this wasn't terribly successful.

However, as I tried to console him with words like "it's ok, it's ok," something like a "bond" had developed between Seto and me.

Frankly speaking, he was more like a friend than my "Friend #1," Kido, who had refused to even talk to me at that time.

As such, Seto became my "Friend #2."

And that had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he had come to me one day, asking "We're... friends, right?" with an expression that insinuated "I'll die if you say no."

I merely enjoyed spending my days with this boy called Seto.

As time passed, eventually Kido also became willing to talk to me. Even though it's still a little unnatural, even now, the three of us were still sailing smoothly through our lives...

...No. It was not smooth, not in the least.

In fact, it was pretty much the complete opposite of "smooth sailing."

If the bed we're currently sitting on was the sailboat, it would be one with a broken sail trying to make its way all alone through the dead center of the Pacific Ocean in the midst of a terrible storm.

...And that's why we're having these review meetings.

To be honest, we didn't like being called "monster" or "demon" by the employees and other inhabitants of the facility, and we were sick of signs saying "Monster Room" being taped to our door.

Thus, we had to get rid of this reputation as soon as possible.

"M-monster... Demon..."

"Yeah, I really hope they'd quit it..... Eh?"

I hadn't spoken those names aloud earlier, merely thought them in my mind. Then, why did Seto repeat them?

I pushed myself up to look at Seto, who raised his head up from the pillows he had been buried in, staring at me with watery eyes – eyes that had been dyed a mesmerizing crimson.

I gave a dazed "ah," closing my eyes after a moment of thought.



(...*You can hear what I'm thinking again?*) I said aloud in my mind.

"I-I'm sorry, I can hear it." Seto replied with a guilty expression, retreating back into his pillow again until only his eyes remained visible.

As I thought.

I started speaking internally once more. (*It's stopped happening as often lately, hasn't it? But then again, Seto's powers always start so suddenly.*)

Seto, with his mouth still buried in the pillow, shyly replied, "It should stop in a while..."

I gave a doleful grin, but a strange air suddenly emitted from Kido's direction.

I looked over in apprehension to see Kido glaring at Seto with a furious expression on her face. Seeing that, Seto looked just like a mouse that had come face to face with a deadly snake.

Hastily shaking his hands, he tried to defend himself against Kido's apparently accusing thoughts. "A-ah, keigo! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Eh.....? N-no! I'm not doing this on purpose!"

Of course, in saying so, he was still using keigo. His habit really was incredibly deeply rooted within his very character.

Kido threw aside her cat's cradle, pushing herself to her knees as she advanced towards Seto, her right hand forming a fist as she said, "How many times do I have to say, don't use keigo...?"

Simultaneously, perhaps due to extreme fear, large tears rolled from Seto's eyes as he began letting out soft, pathetic screeches of terror.

This was really bad.

I slid myself between Seto and Kido, raising my arms in a placating manner.

"Wait, stop, stop! Kido, aren't you getting a little too angry over this? Right?"

I forced a smile on my face as I spoke, attempting to stall her for a few moments, but Kido merely shot a glare towards me, as though saying "move, or I'll kill you too."

Her gaze really was incredibly unfriendly. If I were using tokusatsu heroes like *Ultraman* as an example, she'd definitely be like a little enemy monster.

As I thought this, I heard Seto giggle from behind me as he repeated, “pffff, little monster.”

(Hey, what are you laughing about!? I’m trying to stick up for you, you know!?) I spoke in my head, and Seto hastily mumbled a “I-I’m sorry!”

As expected, Kido’s anger seemed to flare just a little bit more than before.

“You’re using keigo again... and Kano. You said something to Seto just now, didn’t you?” Kido spoke with a tone that was calm, but nevertheless contained unmistakably sharp killing intent.

“Eh!? N-no, I didn’t say anything! Right, Seto!?”

“Y-yeah! He didn’t say anything about a little monster or anything!”

The next moment, Kido’s swift fist flew straight towards my lower chest.

“Oof!”

Unable to stand against that force, I fell backwards onto the white sheets. That blow had been such a beautiful K.O. that I could almost hear the game over sound effect.

At the same time, Seto let out an even more pathetic “Eeeeeek–!!”

Trying my best to ignore the sharp pain from my stomach, I raised my head to look at Kido’s expression. Perhaps because the punch had dissipated her anger a bit, tears began building in her eyes until she started sniffing.

And then, as though in agreement, Seto began to cry as well.

When I’d recovered, thoroughly burnt out from the punch, I was faced with the two of them, sobbing in unison...

.....Hey, what on earth is going on here?

Normally, in this kind of situation, shouldn’t I be the one crying?

However, both of the them merely started crying harder and harder, completely disregarding my feelings about the matter.

“Aah, this is bad, if this keeps going...”

I was snapped out of my thoughts by the realization as I looked towards Kido. As expected, a crimson tint was beginning to creep into her eyes, and her form had begun to blur slightly.

Right... For some reason, whenever Kido was upset, or crying, lonely or anything else to that effect, she'll start turning transparent... Strictly speaking, she would become "unnoticeable by others."

However, the power also had a quite arbitrary limitation, making her "noticeable" again when she "came into physical contact with others."

Thus, as long as we held her hand, or poke around the space where she disappeared, it would be fine. The most troublesome instances were when Kido walked outside while in her invisible state.

There have been times when Kido's power had activated because of negative emotions, and then she had wandered out of the room.

Before, when she'd disappear in such a way, and not return at all afterwards, Seto and I would spend hours searching for her.

It's a bit embarrassing to say, but it was only in times like that when I couldn't really call Seto a crybaby, because I also couldn't stop crying myself.

In the end, we weren't able to find her even until morning, but when we decided to return to our room for the time being, we ended up finding the culprit asleep on the bed as if nothing had happened. I really don't want something like that to happen again.

Which is why... it'd really be easier to find a way to stop their crying right now.

And so I imagined in my head. I had kept a special form in reserve, one that neither of them had seen yet, and now I let its form, shape, sound, float to my mind...

As I opened my eyes, both of them simultaneously gave an elated "Wow!" Hearing this expected reaction, my own spirits were raised substantially.

I jumped quickly to the ground, waving a paw at them. The two of them initially had a surprised expression, but at my gesture, their expression turned completely to large smiles.

"It's a cat!"

That's right. For times like this, I'd gone to observe stray cats wandering about out at night, remembering their form.

Over these few months spent with them, I came to learn that Kido liked cute things, and that Seto liked animals.

If that was the case, then this "black cat" form should be something they'd both love.

Like I expected, both of them started showing great interest.

Kido leaned out from the bed, clapping her hands, saying, "H-here! Come here, kitty!" At the same time, Seto started beckoning to me as well.

Taking a close look, the crimson coloring had disappeared from both their eyes, and Kido's form had also become clear again.

Ufufufu, how cute.

If I jumped over there right now, they'd definitely be delighted, but maybe I'll tease them a little longer.

As though in revenge for earlier, I began to draw closer a few steps, before running back, repeating this cycle a few times. This seemed to tug at their hearts in a similar pattern of motion, and they began doing odder and odder actions in an attempt to garner my interest.

This really, really was satisfying. To be honest, I felt so delighted I could practically fall to the ground in laughter at this very moment.

Since they seemed to enjoy this so much as well, I couldn't just leave it at that.

Then, what next? Perhaps I should do a little dance. Yeah, that sounds good.

In a state of ecstasy, I bounded onto the table, starting a light dance. Seeing this, the two of them began laughing uproariously.

Aah, how nice. I haven't felt this happy in a long time.

I was starting to dance more and more wildly, when suddenly I heard a *clunk* coming from the doorway.

Initially, I didn't mind it much, but seeing the other two looking towards the doorway with whitened faces, I too turned.

I hadn't noticed because of all the laughter, but at some point, the door to our room had been opened, and in the space connecting the room and the hall, the night patrolman was lying spectacularly on the ground.

Why had he suddenly fallen in such a place? I was confused for an instant, but the reason was easy to understand with only a bit of thought.

I stopped, feeling a coldness spread throughout my entire body.

"W-what do we do, kitty?" Kido asked me carefully.

What do we do? I wanted to ask that, myself.

Without a single idea, I could only let out a "meow~"

.....Afterwards, the patrolman seemed to have become a little mentally disturbed, and was sent to some other facility after proclaiming that he had "entered the room intending to remind the children to quiet down late at night, but instead was met with a frenetically dancing black cat."

And, it goes without saying, this incident undeniably induced a new wave of negative comments towards Room 107, our so-called "Monster Room."

"Room 107" at the end of the single-rooms building.

Sitting on the slightly dirty lower bunk of one of the two bunk beds placed in the room - my bed - we were chattering about the review meeting as usual.

Today's topic was - "We, who are now known as the 'monsters' of this care facility... really can't let this go on any longer." Something like that.

Though... the situation was, almost shockingly, completely unimproved from before. More than that, it seems our reputation was getting worse and worse, with rumors about us spreading from all over the place.

For instance - **"There's been ghostly sobbing coming from the innermost stall of the first-floor girls' toilet every night, but there isn't a soul in sight."**

Moreover, everyone seemed to have a consensus that "the ghost was always frequenting our room." Seriously, who started this rumor anyway?

Not just frequenting - she *does* live in our room, dammit!

I tried asking Kido about it, but she seemed to have an idea as to who the culprit was, angrily saying, "I'm going to go beat up the one who started that rumor...!"

I managed to talk her out of that.

Another case - **"An employee, whom one of the Rm.107 kids spoke to, disappeared the very next day. They must be demon children."**

I was utterly confused by this rumor, but afterwards I heard Seto remark, "Speaking of which, there was an employee, a man, who was wearing women's underwear before. He disappeared after I asked him 'Isn't that the wrong kind?'"

So I guess that's our fault too.

As for why the employee had done that, and why he'd left, us children didn't really understand.

And the last one - **"There's a guy from the single-rooms building who keeps sniffing cats."** That one was me. It was incredibly embarrassing.

These dark rumors seemed to pile up one after the other every single day, to the point where we couldn't even begin to try to dispel them.

...Well, not "we." The other two aren't even trying, so I ended up having to do all the work.

Today, too, I listed those rumors as examples, and looked to the others for any ideas.

"I think Kano's disgusting," Kido replied, without any hesitation in her gaze.

"Eh? A-ah... eh?"

Hearing this merciless answer, there was an instance where I thought, *could this have some kind of hidden meaning?*

"Disgusting."

No, no, it must just be the surface meaning.

"...Ah, I'm not talking about what you think of me sniffing cats. I was asking how we should proceed from here..."

I tried to brush off Kido's sharp words and focus our attention back on the meeting, but Kido only gave a sleepy yawn, looking as though she didn't care much about the matter.

I could feel tears begin welling up in my eyes. Why did I have to be called 'disgusting'? I was just trying my best.

Probably guessing my thoughts, Seto leaned over quietly. "It's not disgusting. I do it a lot too."

.....Sorry, Seto. I guess it *is* kind of disgusting to do that all the time.

"Speaking of which, how much longer are we going to discuss? Is there even a point to this?" Kido rubbed her eyes as she said tiredly.

"Uu... No, that's... you're right." I didn't have anything else to say to that.

Even though I'd gathered the other two with the purpose of having a review meeting almost every night, we've never really found any good way of changing our situation at all.

"But well... If we keep going like this, we might actually get kicked out for real, you know?"

"W-we'll really get kicked out?"

Hearing my words, Seto began trembling violently.

What exactly were Seto's tear ducts made of, anyway? Being able to produce so many tears in such a short time was actually rather impressive.

"Aah, come on. It's ok, don't cry."

I patted his back, and Seto nodded softly, wiping his eyes.

One of his good points was that he doesn't cry for a long time at once. But even so, he really did cry a lot.

"Never mind. I don't think the situation will get to the point where they'll tell us to 'get out now!' or anything like that. I think the employees are a little scared of us, so if we could just increase their liking towards us..."

"L-liking...?"

Though I said that, I didn't have any ideas in mind.

In the end, was raising their positive feelings towards us really possible?

Even though there's nowhere lower to go than 'monster,' but now that we already hold that title, how should we work to raise our reputation to 'human' at least?

"...she fell asleep."

While I was thinking to myself, Kido, still sitting up, had nodded off.

That's probably why she hadn't reacted with violence to Seto's keigo.

But then, there's no reason to wake her up and make her angry again.

I placed a hand on her back, carefully laying her down on the bed. Even though she was so cool and aloof when awake, Kido really was pretty cute when she was quietly asleep.

"Really, she doesn't seem like a troublesome and scary kid at all."

I gently poked at Kido's cheek, laughing softly, and Seto also giggled, adding, "As long as she's not angry."

At this moment, Kido made a soft noise in her sleep, and Seto jumped with a yelp of alarm.

If people saw the two of them now, I'm sure even the people spreading the rumors would be surprised and say that they were nothing to be afraid of at all.

But... I had never said these things to the other people.

After all, even I'd thought Kido was a ghost, and was afraid of her, when we first met.

If we humans don't communicate with one another... if we don't at least try, we'll never know the truth.

It would be easier if they could understand, but it's difficult to tell them. If everyone knew, then it'd be possible for us to all live in peace. But the problem is...

"So... our problem must be these 'eyes,' after all..." Seto, who had fallen in his surprise, clambered back onto the bed as he spoke.

"Sorry, I heard it again..." His eyes had turned red once more without my notice.

I gave a small smile, saying in my head, (*Maybe it's actually convenient to have your power, now that Kido's asleep.*) Seto smiled happily as well, quietly answering, "Then we'll make good use of it."

(Really, what is this kind of power? It... must be the kind of psychic abilities that we saw on TV, right?)

“Um... I guess... That means, we really should ask someone about...”

As he spoke, Seto's eyes filled with tears once more.

(Ahaha, sorry about that. Aah, we really can't tell just anyone about this, right?)

“Y-yeah, that's... it's just too frightening...”

That's right. In our meetings, the point of “we're only called 'monsters' because of our eye powers” had come up before.

To be honest, all our knowledge about our powers came only from our actual experience. I was alright, but Seto and Kido couldn't even control their powers fully, even now.

If we could all control our powers, I'm sure the rumors about us would quickly diminish to maybe less than half of now.

And the proposition, “shouldn't we ask an adult about this?” had also been brought up.

However, the television series we watched at that time quickly shattered this possibility.

For some reason, on that day there was a series called “Psychometrer Eiji” showing on TV, about a boy who could read the minds of others. Just as we were joking around about how that boy was just like Seto, the psychic ended up being captured by a mysterious organization, subjected to horrific experiments, and then died.

...At that point, our - especially Seto's - expression... could be described roughly as “like having been dumped into a freezer and left there for a long period of time.”

In that very moment, we came to the joint realization that “psychics would get experiments performed on them and die.”

Speaking of which, after a few minutes, I'd thought Seto would start trembling again, but instead he had silently buried himself into his blankets, and hadn't come out for the entire day.

After that day, the word “Psychometrer” became a taboo to Seto, and lately, had also become a magic word that Kido would occasionally mumble to observe Seto's reactions to.

And because of that reason, our powers remained a secret, confined to this room and this room alone.

(I mean, everything about these powers are unknown, from its source to the reason it appeared... Isn't that a bit scary to think about?)

"It really is... And mine and Kido's even flare up unexpectedly..."

Seto sighed.

His power of "reading the thoughts of people" seems to vary in strength depending on time and place. At its strongest, he can even feel the target's "emotions" and "past memories."

Conversely, if it was just slightly activated, like now, he can only read "words that are consciously conjured up in the mind of the target."

Once, Seto had tried to explain the details to me clumsily, but there were still too many points that could only be understood by the actual holder of the power.

(You two really have troublesome powers. Especially Kido, since anyone who looks at her can see when her powers are activated.)

While it was a little less unpredictable than before, Kido still didn't seem to have control over her powers of "invisibility."

Though it seemed to activate, as she claimed, when she got angry, but what, really, was the reason?

Luckily, nothing too bad had happened yet... I wanted to think this way, but no matter what, it was still important to learn to control that power before a horrible situation really comes to pass.

Really... is there any way?

"If we could at least hold the powers back, it'd be nice..."

(Hold back, huh...? Well, you should focus on trying to hold back your tears first, right?)

I smiled as I spoke in my head, and Seto blushed as he nodded and mumbled in agreement.

(You know, jokes aside, maybe it really does have a connection. Both yours and Kido's powers don't activate when you don't cry, after all.)

“B-but that’s impossible for me... I want to change, but it’s hard to...”

Seto looked dejected.

(Speaking of which, you haven’t changed your keigo habit either.)

“Uu... yes. I’m sorry.”

Seeing how despondent he seemed, it was clear he wasn’t doing it on purpose.

Kido should know this as well, but even now, she hadn’t shown any sign of dropping her stern attitude about Seto’s habit.

To be honest, seeing their ineptitude with handling these situations, I felt my own capabilities. It was a chilling thought.

No... Even the other children around us were mostly inept. Even though I’d had this thought from before, I really did hate this part of myself that looked down on the “humanity” of others.

“But, really, Kano, you’re amazing. You can control your power, and you can even help us with ours.”

Seto smiled as he said that, but for some reason, I didn’t feel happy at all to hear it.

(Ehh? That’s not true at all! I’m the same as you two. There’s so much I don’t know, so much I’m afraid of...)

“.....Huh?”

Seto, who should’ve read my thoughts, suddenly tilted his head a bit.

I hastily looked over at him, and in that moment, the crimson tint disappeared from his eyes, replaced by their normal color.

“T-that’s weird. I think it stopped! Hmm... I’m sorry, it’s always like this.” Seto lowered his head.

“Um, aah, it’s fine, it’s fine! Don’t worry about it.” I forced a smile on my face.

“But, that last thing you were thinking about... I didn’t really understand...”

“.....Oh, I see. It must be– well, because your power was about to deactivate, so the words must’ve gotten a bit muddled, right?”

“Y-yeah, I guess that’s it. Aaaah... this power’s so mean, suddenly coming and going without warning.” His shoulders slumped as he spoke.

“Never mind, that’s not too bad. Watching you fretting over your power is kind of funny too, you know?” I said teasingly, and Seto puffed up his cheeks as though saying “please don’t make fun of me!”

“But really... I’ve got to change! It’s really not a good feeling to keep on troubling everyone like this.” Seto said ardently. Unlike his timidity from before, now he suddenly looked quite dependable.

“Ahaha, well, take it slowly. Even if you don’t force yourself to change instantly, it’s...”

“.....Not ok.”

The one who interrupted me was Kido.

The cute, sleeping face had been replaced by her usual prickly expression, and she was presently glaring daggers at Seto.

“Keigo. When are you going to get rid of your habit?”

Her voice was quiet, and Seto gave a soft yelp in response.

Though I was already used to this kind of dialogue, but for some reason I felt particularly irate, and I interrupted before I could stop myself.

“.....That’s not good, you know?” As I spoke, Kido, still lying on her back, shifted her gaze from Seto to me.

“What did you say?” Kido said as she slowly stood up, glaring towards me.

Normally, at this point, I’d definitely just put on a smile and try to gloss over the problem, but today, somehow, I couldn’t calm my own anger.

“Are you even listening to Seto? Didn’t he just say he wanted to change?”

“But he hasn’t changed, has he? Even though I’ve said it over and over.” Kido showed no sign of backing off, speaking out in objection.

Listening to our exchange, Seto gave a small “u-um.....” as though to interrupt.

But nothing could stop me now.

“.....It makes me angry.”

I could have - *should* have - just shut up, but I had spoken my true feelings. And right afterwards, all my thoughts began pouring from my lips as I continued speaking.

“You don’t think about others, and you’re just focused on being headstrong and going by your own ideas every day. Who do you think you are? To be honest, I can’t continue agreeing with what you’re doing anymore. And Kido, you...”

A sudden impact connected with my face, and my field of vision gave a violent shake.

With this sudden circumstance, my thoughts froze for a second, but as I heard Seto’s soft, almost soundless shriek of terror, I finally realized that Kido had slapped me.

"That *hurt*."

I glared at Kido.

These dark feelings that I had never experienced up until now were beginning to fill my heart.

Kido, too, was showing clear enmity in her expression.

“Who’s the one who never thinks about other people? You’re the same. You know nothing about me.”

As Kido spoke, her eyes gradually began to turn crimson.

And at the same time, that despicable hand that had hit me began turning invisible little by little.

But even seeing her like that, I didn’t reach forward to calm her as usual, merely made a noise of contempt.

“All you ever do is beat me up, so how am I supposed to know anything? I’m not Seto, you know? And what, you’re just going to disappear again? How nice, having such a convenient power.”

There must have been a better way to put it, but at that moment, I merely let myself get carried by my emotions, uttering those derisive words.

There was a flash of confusion on Kido's face, as though she couldn't understand what I had said, but right afterwards, her face grew scarlet with anger as she reached forward to grab my collar.

"You!"

Suddenly pushed backwards by the entirety of Kido's strength, I fell, unable to do a thing.

I wanted to fight back, but even struggling with all my might, I couldn't change my current position. Unfortunately, Kido was completely and undeniably stronger than me.

She continued to press her weight down upon me, mercilessly assaulting my face with repeated strikes.

Hearing the sounds of the slaps, Seto could only let out a powerless "eek...!"

".....It hurts...!What, you're just going to..."

"Shut up! Just shut up!"

I opened my mouth, but Kido quickly put both hands over it. Unable to speak, I could only let out grunts as I kicked futilely at air.

While I was still silenced, Kido's tears began to fall onto my face.

"...Kano... I... hate you...!"

As Kido spoke, there was a sharp, rending pain in my heart, and even my legs became completely devoid of energy.

This was different from the burning pain of being hit. This, the pain of hearing her words, was a bitter, frigid pang, as though I had been doused in icy water.

The more the realization of her words sunk into my mind, the tighter my heart seemed to constrict.

Against a building, blinding fear, I pushed Kido's arms away. Her hands moved to her face, covering it as she began to whimper quietly.

I couldn't even think of anything to say to her as she cried.

What should I say? Now that she's said she hated me, what can I...

“...Thanks for that.”

As my brain was furiously trying to think of an answer, those completely unthinkable words fell from my lips.

I was deeply troubled. I hadn't - *at all* - planned on saying anything like that, but then... why did I?

Kido looked stunned by what I'd said, and it was that moment that I realized I'd done something that I couldn't take back.

To be honest, I wanted her to punch me like usual.

If that would make her happy, if that would make her not hate me, I don't care if I end up bruised and battered. I'm not worth anything anyway.

However, Kido didn't raise her hand to me once more. She merely wiped away her tears with a hand before moving away from me, away from the bed, without a single word.

“W-wait a moment, Kido! I'm sor-”

“.....Enough. Don't talk to me.”

I leaned out from the bed to speak, but Kido didn't even turn around as she responded coolly.

As I was still at a loss as to how to respond to her aloof attitude, Seto scrambled forward as well, saying, “I-it's my fault!”

Right afterwards, he covered his mouth, catching himself using keigo once more.

While I normally didn't mind his carelessness with that habit, now even I felt a surge of hatred towards it.

However, Kido didn't reprimand Seto's words as usual, merely said quietly, “Seto too. Enough.”

“...And, I'm leaving this place.”

Both Seto and I froze at her next words.

“W-what do you...?”

“The employees talked to me before about this. They said there’s someone who wants to adopt me... I was going to refuse, but really, I want to leave this place right now.”

“Y-you’re joking, right!? That kind of thing...” Seto asked suddenly, and Kido finally wheeled around.

“I’m not joking. And I said no kei... never mind.”

Kido gave a slight grimace before turning back, burying herself into the blankets on her bed. “If you speak to me again... I’ll really, *really* punch you.” Leaving that final warning, she fell into silence.

So those just now weren’t real punches?

...Afterwards, the silence continued.

Seto and I didn’t meet each other’s gaze. Instead, we both just continued staring at Kido’s bed.

Surprisingly, Seto didn’t cry, but he also didn’t seem to be holding back his tears. His mind probably hasn’t finished processing what had just occurred, due to the shock.

I really can’t talk right now though. My mind was in the same daze.

After she said she hated me, told me not to talk to her... I had no way at all to ameliorate the situation.

It’s probably because she knew this that Kido would take that sort of attitude. To treat the person she said she “hated” as an enemy... it was the right way to go.

“...What’s going to happen to us?”

“.....Well.”

I gave an extremely brief reply to Seto’s sudden question, leaning back against the bed and closing my eyes.

If I didn’t do that, I’d probably end up taking out my anger on him.

Seto remained for a few moments, stutteringly attempting to begin another sentence, but he gave up after seeing my lack of reaction. Leaving a lone “I’m really, very sorry,” he climbed up to the top bunk.

After a while, the sound of his quiet sobbing came from above me, but in a couple of minutes, even his crying stopped, and a hush fell over the entire room.

In the silence, all kinds of thoughts began welling up in my mind, but there were none that would help us return to that happiness of yesterday. At some point amidst this thought, I fell asleep without conscious realization.

Kido's adoption date was a week away. In that entire week, we didn't end up speaking a single word to each other.

"Aah, the weather's great, isn't it? It feels just right for a picnic~"

The voice came from the driver's seat, bright and cheery as though to break through the uncomfortable silence in the car.

Sitting behind the driver's seat, I didn't answer, merely gave a soft sigh.

...It wasn't really because I was trying to be cold on purpose, though.

Outside the window, the pedestrians bustling about the sidewalk were all wearing heavy coats. To still talk of picnics, even though that scenery clearly indicated the low temperature outside... I'd definitely freeze to death if we really ended up going. I'm no good with cold weather, after all.

But then, if I actually spoke out in opposition of the idea, I might end up being thought of as a rude, insensitive brat. That'd be troublesome.

And thus, I kept my various thoughts to myself and only let a single sigh escape.

"B-but it's probably still too cold for a picnic..."

Perhaps because he was unable to stand the silence any longer, Seto spoke with a forced smile from the seat beside the driver's.

At first, I thought he had read my thoughts again, but it didn't seem that way. After all, his eyes hadn't turned crimson.

"What are you talking about~? This kind of weather is nothing for kids, right? Let's start preparing right after we get home!" The cheerful voice rang out once more from the driver's seat.

Seto looked a bit troubled, but merely gave a light laugh in response, seemingly unsure of what else to do.

He had always been an outdoorsy type of person, which was a little surprising, given his personality in general.

Often, he'd run out all by himself, and come back home covered in dirt, as though he'd been playing with animals all day.

It was like this one day about a month ago too. Even though I had huddled, freezing, in the room, he seemed to have been running around outside the entire day.

And thus, it was strange for Seto to say something like "it's too cold for a picnic."

Though, I can understand why Seto chose to tell a small lie like that. No matter what, that could only end up an embarrassingly bad situation.

I glanced surreptitiously to my side, and my gaze briefly met that of Kido's, who was sitting behind Seto's seat.

She immediately looked disgruntled, turning her own gaze out the window to her other side.

I had gotten my hopes up when our eyes had met for that instant, but my shoulders sunk at her unchanged attitude. At the same time, I felt a little irritated, and turned to look out my window as well.

Ever since our fight during that review meeting a week ago, Kido and I had remained in this kind of situation.

Since we were living in the same room, it was impossible to completely avoid each other, but even in that kind of proximity where a stalemate was difficult to maintain, we both stubbornly kept our silence.

Seto had seemed constantly nervous over that period of time, but, perhaps knowing any kind of intervention would only complicate matters, he didn't end up saying anything in particular.

Well, it's not as if I myself didn't want to talk to Kido.

On the contrary, I wanted to mend relations with her immediately, and there were occasions where I'd walk towards her without consciously realizing what I was doing.

However, as soon as I got close, Kido would turn her fierce glare on me, constantly refusing to mend our friendship.

And besides, she's told me to never speak to her again, and there's really nothing else I can do, so the anguished silence stretched up until today.....

"But anyway, sorry for everything happening so abruptly~ Did the administrator of the facility not tell you that we were going to adopt the three of you together?"

They hadn't, so this development was indeed pretty sudden.

The people who were going to adopt us had the last name "Tateyama," and from the beginning, they'd planned to take in not just Kido, but all three of us.

Of course, Seto and I hadn't heard anything about it until two days ago, when the administrator called us over for a talk.

To be suddenly told that this new family would come to get us two days later, when we'd never even seen or talked to them before... it seemed almost absurd. Even if we were children, were thought of as monsters, it was still too cruel.

Simply put, they probably want us out of the facility, but their crude way of doing things did make us a bit angry.

While there was the option of refusing, though, both Seto and I agreed to the adoption immediately.

After all, we had no regrets or attachment regarding the facility.

And most importantly, this was a wonderful chance for us, as we had been depressed over the prospect of Kido leaving before we were able to talk to her again.

"N-not at all! We're really happy to be able to be adopted and taken care of together! R-right, guys..." Seto said, turning towards the back seat.

"Why did you have to turn around, idiot," I said in my mind, but unfortunately, Seto's eyes hadn't turned crimson, and I was merely faced with his expression that said, "Please just say 'yes'?"

Defeated, I answered, "Very happy."

Conversely, Kido kept a disgruntled expression on her face, lazily giving a vaguely affirmative grunt in response.

Beginning to tremble with a stiff smile still on his face, Seto's expression seemed to be saying, "Can't you answer in a better way...?"

...Well, I know this, not because I had learned to use Seto's ability, but just because he's way too easy to read.

However, while Kido looked unhappy about the whole matter, she also didn't put up a fuss after learning that we were coming as well.

Honestly, I had been really worried that she'd say something like, "If you guys are going then I'm not," but it seems that had been unnecessary.

Though... seeing her attitude earlier, she probably hasn't forgiven us either. I couldn't help feeling a little dejected, thinking about that.

In our time together ahead of us, would we ever be able to mend our relationship?

"Al~right, we're here~! Come on, get off, get off!"

As the car stopped in the parking lot, we got off one by one, and before us was a small, red brick house.

Faced with this unfamiliar kind of building, Seto and I looked around, taking in the surroundings.

We were probably thinking the same thing - "Are houses like this common in this area?" This house seemed to have a very different structure from what was typically expected of residential area buildings.

".....It's cute." Kido muttered quietly.

I turned towards her, but as soon as our eyes met, Kido's face reddened, and she glared back with a look that said, "What are you looking at, trash?"

Though I wanted to say something to explain myself, I remembered what Kido had said that night. "If you speak to me again... I'll really, *really* punch you." I kept silent, in light of that.

But... that's right. Kido likes cute things.

I guess this kind of house is what girls would think of as "cute."

Pondering this, an idea floated to my mind.

If I turned into a cat again, would that make Kido happy?

The last time I'd done so, Kido had been mesmerized, almost as though she'd forgotten the cat was actually me in disguise.

Why hadn't I thought of this earlier? That's right, wouldn't that be easy? If I did that one more time...

"Come on, come on! Hurry and come in~!"

Peering in through the entrance, it was a completely different story from the odd exterior of the house. On the inside, it seemed just the same as the normal houses I've seen on TV.

Although this place had a different, unfamiliar scent from the room I'd been living in, there was a certain renewed realization to the fact that we would be living here from now on.

"Hehe, how's the new house? You can use whatever you need in here– ...Ah, yes, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Tateyama Ayaka. I'm fine whether or not you decide to call me Mom, but either way, I do hope you'll think of me as family."

With a bright smile, Ayaka-san washed away any uncertainties I might have held in my heart up until this point.

"I-it's nice to meet you."

As I finished speaking, Ayaka-san replied with a "Yup, nice to meet you too!", patting me on the head.

A little embarrassed, I looked towards Seto and Kido, but the two of them looked back with slightly envious expressions.

Noticing this, Ayaka-san turned towards the others, patting their heads as well while saying, "Nice to meet you both too~!"

Could it be that her palm holds some kind of calming powers?

The two of them looked gratified as they accepted the head pats.

"Then~ Anyway, how about you three play in your room until your older sister comes home?"

Hearing this, all three of us suddenly froze.

"O-older sister...?"

Seto asked carefully, and Ayaka-san looked a bit confused. "Hmm? You'll have a sister, older than you all by one year... Odd, didn't the administrator tell you?"

Though I wanted to say, “Sorry, that administrator didn’t tell us anything at all,” but Seto quickly answered, “A-aah! Something like that, yes!”, so I merely nodded silently.

Since she had received us so warmly, it seemed unnecessary to refute her statements or to pry too much into matters.

After all, if the girl was her daughter, she must also be a kind, gentle person.

Seto and I looked to each other with a small nod and noise of affirmation, confirming that our thoughts were the same.

At this kind of moment, we could feel something of a bond, forged through months of taking care around Kido’s emotional outbursts. Well... though, if it was put that way, it sounded a little pathetic.

But Kido herself seemed unable to understand our thoughts, instead beginning to tremble, white-faced.

“Ah? What’s wrong? Are you ok?”

“N-nothing. I’m fine...”

Kido answered Ayaka-san’s question in a weak tone.

Perhaps realizing that she really didn’t look fine at all, Ayaka-san patted Kido’s head again, asking, “Are you worried about having an older sister?”

Shockingly, Kido’s expression cleared almost instantaneously, and she let out a quiet, “No...”

It seems that her palm really does hold special powers.

After bustling about the entrance for a while, we finally made our way deeper into the house.

Down the hall, next to the stairs leading to the second floor, there was a door with the sign, “Children’s Room.”

“It’s a little sudden, but from today on, this’ll be your room!” Ayaka-san pulled the door open as she spoke, and our gazes were met with a large, brightly lit room, very different from that hated “Room 107.”

“Wow...” Seto gave a sigh of wonder. His eyes were shining, as though he had some grand ideas about our future here.

We hastily made our way into the room, looking for interesting objects.

There was a cupboard filled with various toys, a bookshelf lined with a large amount of tokusatsu hero stories, among others... Our hearts leapt at each of the things in this room.

“Aah~ It seems all of you like it here. That’s great! Then, before your sister comes back, stay here and be good, ok?”

Ayaka-san gave another smile as she spoke, closing the door.

That left the three of us in the Children’s Room.

With that, the apprehension towards this “sister” began to assault our minds.

It wasn’t as bad when Ayaka-san was here with us, but knowing that we were about to come face-to-face with an older sister still caused some amount of anxiety.

I glanced dazedly at the others, and unsurprisingly, they were both sitting as I was, trembling while looking down at the ground.

But even with the situation like this, it wouldn’t be a good idea for the three of us to discuss “what to do next.”

After all, Kido’s threat to punch me if I initiated a conversation still stood. I’m not about to gamble my life like that.

The uncomfortable silence stretched. Can we... really live our lives peacefully in this house?

Seto kept shooting glances at me. Was he expecting me to do something about this? Dammit.

“...I’m going to the bathroom.”

A little jittery due to the nerves and the silence, I made my way out of the room right after I spoke.

As I reached the door, Seto looked over with a brief, impassioned gaze that said, “Please don’t leave me all alone here!”, but I, a little cruelly, shut the door behind me.

I muttered a pointless, “You can do it, Seto!” to myself, before heading over... towards what was probably the bathroom.

A few steps down the hall, I came across the door labeled “W/C.” Though I didn’t really understand the meaning of the English letters, even I knew what it meant.

I walked inside, letting out a long sigh. For some reason, being in here made me feel much more at ease.

Perhaps because I shared my room with the others, the only place that I can really relax is in the bathroom.

That kind of conclusion was a bit sad, so I prevented myself from delving any deeper into that line of thought.

But then, what to do after this?

Even if I went back, that room was stiflingly uncomfortable at this moment.

Then again, if I holed myself in the bathroom, it might cause the other people in the family unnecessary worry.

Really, what to do...

“I’m home!”

Suddenly, a voice, clearly audible even through the door, rang from the entrance, and with that voice, my heartbeat began to accelerate at an alarming pace.

Right afterwards, there was the pattering of energetic footsteps, the clatter of a door being pulled open, and then sudden silence.

It was easy to conclude that the “big sister” had come home.

From her voice, she seemed like quite a lively person. Not a dark, scheming type.

Wait, but maybe, what if, she really was a scheming type...?

.....No, what am I thinking?

Up until now, hadn’t I been the target of hatred from people who had deemed me “evil” without having even come into contact with me?

Even so, I’d done the same thing based on only a voice just now. How horrible of me.

I won’t know for sure until I see it. That’s just how humans are.

With my resolve steeled, I walked out of the bathroom.

Judging by the sound earlier, the girl must have gone directly to the Children's Room right after coming home.

Which means, it was likely that Seto and Kido had already finished their introductions with the "big sister".

Though there'll definitely be some nervousness, if it's those two, I'm sure they'll be ok.

Even if they couldn't really converse properly due to nerves, at least they won't end up saying anything overly harsh or cold.

They might even already be chatting away happily by this point.

As these hypotheses ran through my head, I approached the door to the Children's Room, taking a deep breath and laying a hand on the door handle.

However, the moment I was about to pull open the door, a ridiculous-sounding "Gueh!" came from inside.

.....Hold on.

I've heard this voice before, somewhere.

It must be... a long time ago, in a park...

As my thoughts approached that conclusion, I came to a stunning realization, pulling the door open quickly.

As I expected, I saw a girl curled up on the ground, moaning as she writhed in pain.

Standing to one side, Kido's gaze traveled back and forth between me and the fallen girl, muttering, "W-why didn't he turn back when I punched him... Why are there two Kanos...?"

Having seen the situation up to this point, I slammed the door to the Children's Room shut, before sprinting back towards the bathroom, locking the door and sinking to my knees.

"Oh, God, please don't..."

This was absolutely terrible.

Though there was no use in complaining to a deity that might or might not even exist, I still couldn't stop myself from voicing my thoughts.

Who would've thought that the "big sister" would be the girl I met in that park...?

This was too much of a coincidence. Do things like this even happen in the world? Rather, who on earth is in charge of making things like this happen? You'd better own up. I'll never forgive you.

...No, If it was just that, then a simple "Oh, what a coincidence!" should suffice.

But seeing the position she was in just now, she definitely had just been on the receiving end of a heavy blow, courtesy of Kido. There's no doubt about it.

Now that I think of it, she probably ran into the room, saying something like "I'm Onee-chan~!" as a self-introduction.

Towards her future younger siblings, this kind of interaction shouldn't be seen as odd at all. In fact, it should be a happy occasion.

However, even that cute gesture must have been seen as terribly unforgivable from Kido's point of view.

While nervously awaiting the arrival of the "big sister," I, who was currently embroiled in an argument with her, suddenly barged into the room in the form of the girl I'd often turned into, saying something ridiculous like, "I'm Onee-chan~!"

Well.....

".....She's definitely going to beat me up."

As though to drown out my muttering, a loud pounding suddenly came from the door.

Right afterwards, the doorknob began clattering as someone twisted it violently from outside.

I couldn't help letting out a yelp of fright.

"You're inside, aren't you? Come out. Now."

Kido spoke with a calm-sounding tone, but all I really heard was "I'm going to kill you."

I had looked forward to Kido finally talking to me again for a whole week, but I never thought it would be under this kind of situation. This world was really incredibly horrible.

“M-my stomach kind of hurts.....”

“Got it. I’ll put you out of your misery, so get out here.”

“Eeeek–! C-come on, give me a break here...! I didn’t know things would end up like this...!” I begged with what was probably the most pathetic tone of voice I’ve ever used in my life.

Right afterwards, there was a huge, resounding *bang* on the door, as though it was about to be knocked down.

“Aah, I can’t run now. If I take this hit, I’ll probably die.” With this kind of realization, I resignedly opened the door.

Needless to say, Kido’s expression was that of complete, utter fury.

“Any last words?”

“.....Then let me just say -- Gah-!!”

I’d only gotten halfway through the sentence when Kido’s powerful blow connected with my chest. Unable to stand the force, I fell towards the bathroom floor.

.....Why’d you ask me for my last words if you weren’t going to let me finish?

Aaah... My consciousness was drifting.

Seto, even when I’m gone, you can’t lose to Kido, ok? You have to be strong and survive.

“...Huh? You’re...”

Someone’s voice floated from the distance. Who could it be?

“I knew it! You’re the kid I met in the park before! Wow~ what a coincidence!”

My consciousness was pulled from the brink of oblivion by the girl’s voice.

Getting up hastily in spite of the pain, I saw the young girl smiling down at me.

Semi-long black hair and jet-black eyes... It was the girl from that day, almost completely unchanged from that day.

“It’s been a long time! Do you still remember me?”

That form, that voice, that smell... I hadn't forgotten, not even for a single day.

Right after we'd said "Let's play together again tomorrow," we'd never seen each other again. To think that we'd reunite under these circumstances.....

.....But well, the fact that the setting of the reunion is the bathroom was a bit...

"Ah, y-your stomach..."

Perhaps thinking of how she had hit her earlier, Kido rubbed the other girl's stomach with a worried expression.

"Hm? No problem! None at all! I've had training, after all!"

The girl puffed out her chest proudly as she spoke, adding, "I won't die by any normal means, you know!"

"But I was surprised! I didn't think I'd get punched so suddenly! Aah, you really have a super strong Ultimate Attack!" The girl gave a bright smile, patting Kido on the head.

Kido looked embarrassed, but at the same time, she spoke. "I'm sorry... But it's all Kano's fault," she said, casually pushing all the blame onto me.

"Ah, you said that earlier too. What's going on?" The girl asked, tilting her head.

"N-no! It's nothing! There's a deeper reason to this..."

Feeling extremely guilty, I gave the first answer I could think of.

"A deeper reason? Hmmm, that sounds interesting..."

The fact that I'd used that phrase seemed to pique the girl's interest even further. She stared at me with a wondering expression.

Once again, I was met with the realization that the form, sound, smell of this girl was completely identical with that girl in my memories.

Speaking of which... why did this girl's form stay so deeply in my mind after just such a short meeting?

Even just remembering the form of that cat took me a long time, after all...

Seeing my stuttering, unclear attempts at a response, the girl gave a smile, saying, "Well~ Never mind~"

“Leaving that for now, let’s introduce ourselves! Introductions! Alright?” She turned as she spoke, quickly making her way back towards the room.

Seeing her actions, Kido took a glance towards me, before saying harshly, “Don’t think I’ve forgiven you. You’re going to have to explain this later.” Afterwards, she turned to follow after the other girl.

It seems Kido was still hostile towards me.

Estimating that the other two had already returned to the room, I heaved a long sigh before heading back as well.

~~~

After returning to the room, I did what I could to calm Seto down.

He looked at me with tears in his eyes, saying, “I really thought you were going to be killed...” The fact that I hadn’t died was probably only thanks to luck, though.

If I’d been hit somewhere more serious, I likely would have actually died.

At the girl’s instruction, the three of us sat down in a row, directly facing her.

“Then, it’s time for introductions!”

The girl looked very excited, as though she’d been waiting for this moment for a long time.

“I’m Ayano. Tateyama Ayano! All of you have to call me Onee-chan, ok?”



At a stark contrast from Ayaka-san's attitude earlier, that there's "no need to call her Mom if we didn't want to", the girl called Ayano puffed her chest out as she spoke these words.

"M-my name is Kido Tsubomi. It's nice to meet you." Kido immediately said with a small smile.

From beside her, Seto watched this exchange with an incredibly shocked expression.

It was no wonder. After all, Kido had a friendly expression that she rarely ever showed to us, and gave out her first name, which she had always refused to tell us, so easily. This shock was natural.

I bit back the comment that "that's an unexpectedly docile display for Kido," merely looked on with a slightly displeased feeling.

After that, Seto also made his introduction, "I'm Seto Kousuke..."

Though it was really short, he was able to give a proper introduction, so it did indicate effort on his part.

When I had first met him, it had taken him several hours to work up the courage to get out of his bed, never mind self-introductions.

In that way, it does seem that he's grown quite a lot.

Finally, it was my turn. "I'm Kano Shuuya. Nice to meet you," I said.

The girl had only made small noises of acknowledgement up until my turn, but after I spoke, she let out a laugh, saying, "Now I finally know your name!"

I looked down, feeling a building blush, and mumbled a light, "Ah, yeah."

"Al-right, now that everyone's told me their names, it's about time to....." Right after the round of self-introductions, the girl spoke, beginning to look a little anxious for the first time.

All three of us tilted our heads in confusion at her words. *About time to... to what?*

Judging from her tone, it seems like something that was planned from the beginning, but it was hard to tell what exactly she was referring to from her expression alone.

We waited for her words in silence, but what the nervous-looking girl said next was a bit of an anti-climax.

"It's about time to call me O-Onee-chan, isn't it?"

She looked towards us as she spoke.

"C-conversely, Onee-san is ok too, if you want!"

She continued to glance intermittently towards us, though... I don't think "conversely" is the right word to use there.

But I see. So it's about that.

So it seems she wants her newly acquired siblings - us - to acknowledge her as an older sister.

Looking at the others, Seto had a blank expression on his face, but Kido seemed to be carefully deliberating things in her mind.

After only a moment, she made a soft noise of affirmation, before looking towards the girl, calling out, "Onee-chan."

The girl looked elated, and reached out a hand to pat Kido on the head, saying, "Tsubomi~! So~ cute!" After a moment, she suddenly turned towards Seto and me.

Her glittering eyes clearly spelled out "It's your turn to call me Onee-chan next!", and both Seto and I shrank back a bit from the sudden sense of pressure.

"W-what's wrong? I'm Onee-chan, right? Come on..."

As she said this, she leaned even closer. In truth, it felt like she was giving off a dangerous aura at this point.

"O-onee-chan!" Seto called out, unable to take this pressure.

Though he said it with an air of "getting it over with," the girl didn't seem to mind at all, and reached out to pat Seto's head as well with a "Nice to meet you~! Kousuke~!"

Seto, surprisingly, looked gratified.

That means I was the only one left.

The girl captured my gaze in hers, beginning to inch towards me once more.

Well, just calling her what she wanted to be called would be the best way to go, but honestly, I'd thought she was "the same age as me" or "a year younger" when we first met, so this did feel a little weird.

However, the girl couldn't read my thoughts, so she came closer, saying, "Come on~ I'm Onee-chan~"

That's enough. I've got to give in at this point. Even if it'd be weird, it's just a title. It won't be a big deal once I just say it.

"N-nee-chan."

The moment that I said that, it felt that, somehow, something in my heart had quietly slipped into hiding.

Though, at least, after I'd called her that, my mind seemed to have begun registering her as an "older sister" properly.

The girl blinked, as though in surprise, at my words. "Nee-chan... so there's that too, huh..."

I wondered about the meaning of her words, but after a moment, she said, "Oh well, that's good too! Nice to meet you, Shuuya!" At the same time, she reached out to pat my head.

That was the very moment that the girl before me became "Nee-chan" in my heart.

Getting a head pat from her was different from the one with Ayaka-san. This one made me feel a little uneasy.

Perhaps due to the embarrassment, I pulled back surreptitiously, but Nee-chan immediately puffed out her cheeks, saying, "You dodged just now, didn't you~?"

It shouldn't be a surprise. It was humiliating to receive a head pat in front of the others, after all.

"One more time!"

Seeing her extend her arm with a frown, for some reason, I wasn't able to refuse.

When she was still just "the girl," I'd definitely just stutteringly brush off the demand, but now that I thought of her as an older sister, that wasn't possible anymore.

I leaned back towards her with an air of resignation, and she placed a hand on my hair, affectionately rubbing my head while saying “Go~od boy~!”

My body froze, taut from the awkward situation, and I could see Kido giggling at me after noticing this.

.....Just how long is this going to last?

Right then, I had wanted it to end as soon as possible, but at the same time... there was a feeling that I wanted it to continue forever.

Looking back, it might be the case that I'd transferred the affection I had for my mom onto my sister.

After all... from that day, that moment, up until “the very very end”... I was never, not even once, able to go against her wishes.

## **On the road that certain day**

Under the dim light, I silently trudged along the night road, heading towards my house.

I couldn't feel either heat or coolness.

It felt like all my sensation had gone astray completely.

My memory of the last moment I saw nee-chan, along with the thick shade of orange was scorched into my eyes.

Where should I go? What should I do? I'm no longer aware of anything.

At least, I know I have to follow the orders of that snake.

If I didn't, those two I left behind would have to face a terrible fate.

That snake said that he would kill us. If I went back on my words, I wouldn't know what kind of cruel and ruthless methods he would apply in order to carry out his words.

I am not even allowed to die of my own accord anymore.

On the other hand, I also cannot tell others about this.

The only force that kept my staggering feet moving was the words of that snake that remained in my mind.

“Haa... haa... Uwaa!”

Since I was walking in a haze, my feet got twisted and I collapsed to the ground.

As my knee rubbed hard against the concrete road, an immense pain began to envelop my body.

“Urghh...!”

Grabbing onto a nearby light post, I began to stand up.

Now come to think of it, before I go home, I have to change back to my original form first. It may be better this way.

If I keep posing as nee-chan, once again, that snake will...

... What am I doing? Just, what am I doing?

Why did I have to pretend to be the corpse of my beloved dead sister? Why did I have to go and let them take proper pictures of “hers”? It’s just too much! It’s just way too cruel!

Why didn’t he just kill us right away? It would be better that way.

“Damn it... Goddamn it!...”

As frustrating and shameful as the way things were, it really couldn’t be helped.

What should I do? Someone, please save me... Someone...

“Ayano...? As I thought, is that you Ayano?”

Turning towards the source of the voice, I saw the figure of Kisaragi Shintaro standing under the dim light of the lamppost.

“What are you doing at a place like this?”

It’s weird. Even though I could feel the pain, I didn’t return to my original form.

... Not good. It’s really the worst, meeting this guy at this timing...



“What? Are you not feeling well...? Oh, it’s because of that right? Did teacher tell you something in the supplementary lessons? Good grief. That kind of thing happened because you never put in your best effort. Even though he takes enough trouble to teach you this time too...”

“... Shut up.”

“W-What’s your problem...? You don’t have to glare at me like that you know...?”

Brushing Kisaragi Shintaro aside, I began to walk away.

“Hey! Why did you do that?! What’s wrong with you!?”

At the words of Kisaragi Shintaro, finally, I turned around and uttered:

“It’s all your fault. It’s your fault for not noticing anything.”

## Yobanashi Deceive 5

Night was closing in.

Outside the window, the sunset being slowly swallowed up by the rectangular buildings disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving only a fleeting gleam.

The houses that were bathed in the orange glow finally began to don the darkened garments of nightfall. At this point, no one could prevent the night from arriving.

That’s right. The rules of this world had never cared about personal feelings anyway.

As a matter of course, time won’t turn back, nor will it speed forward. No matter who dies and who lives, the only thing that will continue turning at its current speed was this world.

Gazing out the window in a distracted daze, the veracity of this extremely natural matter of the world now hit me with a deepened realization.

I remained lying down, moving my gaze from the window to one side.

The bookshelf entered my field of vision; lined up neatly upon it were the hero stories that I haven’t touched in quite a while.

I thought back to the main characters performing their valiant deeds in those tales. When was the last time that we had played heroes?

And when was the last time we had run around, pretending to be part of a secret organization?

The more I look back, the more I realize how many things have happened in these few years.

Though we had thought to go to school, we couldn't adapt, and in the end everything was all for naught. At that time, the three of us had cried an entire night in frustration.

We had been remorseful, having wasted the stationery, textbooks and school uniforms Mom and Dad had bought for us.

It really was disheartening. Even though they had said "Do your best!", we weren't able to reciprocate with our efforts.

It was also around that time that Seto could no longer endure his powers, and wanted to leave town.

Because he suddenly ran out, and wasn't back by evening, we were all worried something had happened to him.

Needless to say, we all went out looking for him, but frankly, the hard part was trying to console Nee-chan, who had burst into tears halfway through the search.

Seto came back the next day, and the first words out of his mouth were "I met a cute girl." - At that moment, I felt even more shock than anger.

He was predictably pummeled by Kido later on, but ever since then, surprisingly, Seto's power activated on its own much less often.

That might be thanks to the "cute girl" he met in some forest somewhere, I guess.

It seems they're getting along well recently too, but he's still unwilling to introduce her to us, which makes it seem like there might be some circumstances behind it.

Kido, too, has become milder compared to before, and from some point on, her powers had also come under control.

Even though she said "I've gotten the hang of it" proudly, it really was a little troublesome for Kido to be able to appear and disappear at will.

I remember my heart nearly stopped when I had been talking about... certain things... with Seto, and her disembodied voice had suddenly asked “What’s that supposed to mean?” from beside us.

Speaking of which, the “keigo problem” that had caused conflict between Seto and Kido so often had also been ended with a great amount of effort on Seto’s part.

In the end, it seems the reason Kido didn’t like polite speech was because her previous family had often made cutting remarks towards her in such a way, so her policy became “Friends shouldn’t use keigo with each other.”

After Kido had explained as such, Seto finally began to try harder to get rid of his speech habits. For some reason, this ended up with him adopting an odd way of speaking.\*

Recently, I’d gotten used to his weird speech, but it did leave me with a forlorn feeling.

But in the end, it’s enough for Seto and Kido’s relationship to improve from before, isn’t it?

The two of them wanted to change, and they did.

It’s possible... the only one who hasn’t changed, nor even given a thought to changing... was me, lying there idly in the center of the room.

Before, I had also done this, sitting in a room, doing nothing for the entire day, just thinking about all kinds of things.

When Mom... No, when “my birth mother” had died.

At that time, I really thought I’d just live out the rest of my life feeling like I’m constantly suspended in tepid water.

I’d never even thought about anything like “happiness.”

But then, what had really happened?

I was loved by my new parents, loved by my older sister, and I spent every day thereafter with a smile.

It was almost unbelievable. After all of my efforts, the world had said “be happy” to me.

Until a month ago.

Until the moment that “the mother that raised me,” Ayaka-san, had died. Until then, I had really, foolishly believed in such an idea.

“.....Why did it end up like this?” I couldn’t help but complain.

I would’ve complained like this a long time ago, if the world had ears.

...No, I wouldn’t have. If the world had ears, I wouldn’t complain. I’d probably already crushed those ears to dust.

If the world were capable of “thought,” I’d probably have yanked out its brain fluids and stomped all over it by now.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got, as though I were about to breathe fire at this moment.

What did we do wrong?

We accepted everything the world had given, held back our tears against the *unfairness*, swallowed our complaints against the *unreasonableness*, and when we thought we had finally earned our *happiness*... What awaited us was this kind of result.

Why is everything taken away so, *so* easily?

Can the entity named “the world” not allow us even this small bit of happiness?

Who...? Who was the one who had created this terrible, irredeemable world...?

“...What are you all depressed about?”

I jumped at the sudden voice, and gazed up to see Kido in athletic wear, looking down towards me.

Her hair that used to be messy and short now reached to her shoulders, giving her a more girlish look, but even now, her expression remained as cool as ever.

“Y-you’ve been here?”

How long has she been staring at me? Especially with Kido’s powers, I couldn’t really be sure.

“What’s wrong? You look dispirited.”

Even though she was still expressionless, it did seem that she was worried about me.

As I noticed this, I hastily placed a “smile” on my face.

“No, not at all! I’m not depressed at all? It’s more like I’m super energetic now and everything~ Ah, are you worried because I fell asleep on my own? Kido’s so~ cute... Ouch!”

I said with a cheeky grin, but was suddenly met with Kido’s fist.

“...I knew you were crying. Liar.”

Kido’s words fell with a realization.

The “smile” I had put on had been stripped off, the pain having cancelled my deceiving ability.

“Uu...”

What exactly did my true expression beneath the smiling mask look like?

Unexpectedly exposed, I automatically lowered my head.

“N-no, it’s not that! I’m not crying! No way, I mean...”

To think that this kind of infinitesimal pain would be able to cancel out my powers... it really isn’t very useful when I need it.

Even if I tried to wipe away my tears surreptitiously, it’d just be a meaningless gesture. It won’t change the fact that my distressed expression had already been seen.

“Idiot,” Kido heaved a long sigh, crouching down by my side.

“I-idiot...” While I was unable to give a response, Kido spoke resolutely.

“You don’t have to force yourself. That’s no good.”

Kido was right. Acting this way, all I was really doing was giving out a signal that blared “please worry about me.”

“.....Sorry. My bad.”

I could think of anything to say for myself, so I apologized in a straightforward manner.

Over this month, Kido must also have suffered incredibly. In fact, I’d seen her crying many times as well.

She shouldn't have to spare any thought to worrying about me, but I ended up making her do it anyway. I really am a huge idiot.

"Well, since you're an idiot, it can't be helped. I forgive you."

Kido said with a light pout, but her words put me at ease a bit.

"I'll keep on beating you up in the future as well."

...And then the uneasiness was back. I really won't have long to live, will I?

"Ahaha... By the way, what are you here for? Do you need me for something?"

"Oh, yeah. Onee-chan said dinner's ready. Dad and Seto are already waiting." As she spoke, Kido pointed towards the door.

"Huh, is everyone back already!? Uwah, sorry, I'll be right there!"

I said as I hastened to my feet. Kido merely made a light grunt, standing up with a mutter of "what a troublesome guy."

I agree with that. Even I think so. But even though Kido's words were harsh, it still gave a tender feeling.

Ah... What kind of misunderstanding have I been living under? I'm still surrounded by happiness.

It's different now from when I was all alone. Aren't there still people here, people who'd punch me and be kind to me?

I have to continue living. I have to be happy.

If I become unhappy, it'll make everyone in the family unhappy as well.

...That's right. How can I let the world have its way? I have to survive, to continue living, and laugh in its face with my happiness.

"What's dinner going to be like today~? I hope it's nothing else unthinkable again."

"It should be fine. Though it did smell a bit weird."

"R-really...? Aah, though I don't have a right to complain, seeing as I can't even cook. Since Kido's so good at making food, it'd be nice if Kido cooked sometimes~ Ah, just joking..."

“I’m not against it or anything, but it’s no use. Onee-chan said she wanted to make it herself, and wouldn’t even listen to me.”

As we chatted, we headed over to the dinner table where our family was waiting.

...And as expected, the dinner had a slightly questionable taste, but that day was also the first time in a long while I managed to laugh together with my family members.

— — — —

\* : Seto starts using the -ssu form, which is a contracted version of the polite form (-desu/masu). Technically, it’s still more polite form than plain form, but at least no one in Kido’s family would’ve spoken to her like that.

It was on a spring day that I came to the small park near home. This morning, my sister had asked me to come so that she could discuss something with me.

I chose the swing set among the scattered playground equipment and sat down on it, raising my head to gaze aimlessly at the sky.

Well, I’ve become used to her suddenly saying odd things like this. No... in fact, it’s more of a relief that she’d actually told me what she wanted me to do.

After all, once she’d said “let’s go do something interesting,” and we ended up going out in the middle of the night searching for bugs to catch.

Compared to that incident, “talking in the park” seemed like a much easier task. Of course, given that it was just talking, and nothing more.

But... why exactly was so important that she’d call me over to the park specifically? It must be something that can’t just be discussed anywhere.

Speaking of which, she seemed to be feeling down all the time lately.

Normally, my sister was someone who could be considered *Cheerful* with a capital C. If something could possibly get her down like that, that must be the topic of what she wanted to discuss with me.

It seems her workload had gotten much more difficult once she’d entered high school. Could it be that...?

...No. If it was schoolwork, there was no reason to talk to me about it. Dad would be much more helpful for that kind of thing.

Then, it'd have to be something about high school that wasn't work-related. For instance...

"...Romance...?"

Even as I said that, I felt myself growing agitated.

No, no, that's impossible for someone like her. After all, my sister had been practically raised on shonen manga and tokusatsu hero stories. She would never have the taste for something as shoujo as that. No, impossible. That's right. Completely unthinkable...

"It can't be!"

I suddenly stood up from the swing, causing the seat and chains to creak loudly.

No, I mean, it's my sister's choice to do what she wants, and I know I have no place to intrude upon what she's doing... But, if she really does have someone she liked... What to do?

And furthermore, what if that person was some shady guy with questionable motives?

...There'll have to be blood.

Undoubtedly, the entire family will go out and beat him to a pulp.

If Dad found out, especially, the imagined scene in my head could only be described as "hellish."

Perhaps, after Dad's done with him, there'd be no trace of him ever having existed in this world. Of course, I'll help too.

But then...

If my sister really did have someone she liked, and wanted to talk to someone about it...

If she talked with Seto, he'd definitely only blush and stutter and be of no help. Kido probably won't know what to say either.

Dad was definitely not a possibility, which means out of her family members...



“...I guess that leaves me. Hmm...”

Though the thought had randomly came to my head before, now it feels oddly real.

It's said that high school girls typically have one or two boyfriends or something like that... No, wait, this is no joking matter. One or two? I'd never allow it.

But no matter what, it was undeniable; if my sister suddenly came and said “I'm in love~”, I really wouldn't be extremely shocked.

Speaking of which, she did mention that she made a very good friend before.

If I remember correctly, he also went to the culture festival with the weird shooting gallery last year.

Furthermore, the two of them seemed to have been placed in the same class after getting into high school.

Which means...

“...So that guy, huh?”

Even though he was just an imaginary enemy that I'd thought up of myself, I still felt my gaze narrow in deliberation.

If he dares touch Nee-chan, I'll...

“Sorry~ for being late~”

Accompanied by a spirited voice, my sister ran into view, wearing her winter school uniform. Though she still had the familiar scarf wrapped around her neck, she'd become a high schooler almost without us noticing.

I temporarily locked my previous conjectures into the depths of my mind, answering her.

“What is it, Nee-chan? There's no rush.”

“Nah~ I just felt bad for making you wait such a long time!”

She blushed sheepishly, letting out a soft laugh.

Even though her brand of innocence hasn't really changed over the years, she really has matured a lot after entering high school. It might be heavy-handed to say this about family, but I really do think such a good girl was hard to come by.

“Sorry for suddenly calling you out, by the way~”

“It’s fine~ You’re always like this, after all. Then, what is it?”

“Ah, um. Er...”

Though I asked, it seemed she didn’t quite want to answer. I waited patiently, but she didn’t begin to speak, instead looking a little despondent.

“W-what’s wrong?”

“N-nothing, it’s just... not an easy thing to say. Where should I start~?”

Even though she tried to cover it up, it really did seem there was something very troubling about the subject matter.

The scenario that had gone through my mind earlier began to unfold once more.

“D-do you mean it’s something serious...?”

I was restlessly wondering if it really would be about romance, but my sister seemed to finally steel her resolve, slowly beginning to speak.

“.....No, I... It’s about... Mom... and the reason she died.”

“Huh?”

Faced with a topic completely different from what I had mentally prepared for, I let out a involuntary noise of surprise.

“You know they said Mom was killed in a rockslide, right?” My sister looked down as she asked.

My new mom... Ayaka-san... she had been an archeologist who studied different cultures.

Because of that somewhat uncommon occupation, she was rarely at home, usually running all over the place.

Even on that day, she and Dad had gone out together for...

“They went to do some kind of investigation that day too, right? Or that’s what I heard...”

“Mm, you’re right... Ah, do you want to sit down? I’m not too used to these shoes yet.” My sister spoke, gently clicking the toe portion of her school loafers together.

We sat down together on the park bench nearby as she continued to speak.

“This...” she said, pulling out a notebook from her bag.

It didn’t look old, but, perhaps due to the fact that it had been filled in, the edge had wrinkled slightly.

Across the front, written in a neat handwriting, was *Investigation Notes Regarding the ‘Monster’*.

“What’s ‘monster’ supposed to mean? ...Speaking of which, this was Mom’s? Then why would...”

I reached out for it, but my sister suddenly whipped the notebook back towards herself.

“Uwah...! W-what? I can’t look?”

“W-wait just a moment! I... sorry...”

My sister hugged the notebook against her chest. Looking at her carefully, she was trembling slightly, and tears were building at the edge of her eyes. No matter how you look at it, something was wrong.

“What happened? Are you not feeling well...?”

I rubbed her back, but she only managed to mumble a weak apology.

“Not how I... It’s just... I feel a little scared...”

My mind was swirling in a daze from that hesitant attitude. Could it be that something incredibly terrifying was written in the notebook?

It even has the serious-sounding *Regarding the ‘Monster’* in its title, so... that possibility seemed quite likely.

My sister took three deep breaths, as though to calm herself, before starting once more.

“Sorry I made you worry. I... wanted Shuuya to see what was in the notebook as well. ...But before that, will you listen to me?”

She stared straight into my eyes as she spoke, and I could feel an unshakable, determined resolve behind her gaze.

“Of course! I’ll listen to anything you want to say.”

Hearing my words, she muttered a word of thanks with a sorrowful expression, before cutting to the main topic.

“Shuuya, do you remember? That secret organization game we used to play when we were little?”

“I do remember. It was when we were running around with those hoodies, right? I remember it was called...”

“...‘Mekakushi Dan’.”

Before I could think back, the nostalgic name tumbled from my sister’s lips.

That’s right. Whenever we’d play pretend back then, it’d always be “Secret Organization: Mekakushi Dan.”

“Your ‘eye powers’ were a secret between the four of us, right? An organization that hid the eyes... Now that I think about it, the name’s a little embarrassing.” She looked a bit flustered.

Perhaps that’s true. No matter how you cut it, it really can’t be thought of as a cool name.

...But... I liked the name.

I’d never thought of it this way until now, but through the game, through forming that “secret organization,” my sister had wanted to help us hide our “eyes” that were the source of so much fear and hatred from the people around us.

Calling herself the commander, giving us the hoodies that we could use to hide our “eyes”, helping us to smile... all of this was her doing.

But then, why would she bring this up now? I still couldn’t see the main point of this discussion.

“Why are we talking about this? Does this have to do with what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“.....Mm-hm.”

She took another deep breath, beginning slowly.

“Mom... she knew about the 'eye powers' from the very beginning. She even knew how much trouble the powers had given all of you.”

“Huh!? A-are you serious? We tried so hard to hide it! So that they wouldn't throw us out...!”

“I know, I know. But... the fact that Mom wanted to save everyone from the 'power of the snakes' ... I... I didn't even know...”

Tears began to roll down her cheeks as she spoke, dotting the dried ground. She didn't wipe away the tears, though, merely clutched the notebook tightly to her chest, sniffing.

“Things are getting so terrible... What do I do... all of you might die...!”

I... was completely powerless.

I couldn't say anything, even to my sobbing sister.

I couldn't even understand the sudden truth placed before my very eyes.

That's right. I didn't know anything at all.

That miserable entity called the “*monster*,” that “*curse*” residing within our bodies, within Dad...

From that moment on, the last bit of “happiness” surrounding us began to hopelessly crumble away.



“...It seems the '*Clear-eyed Snake*' possessing Dad really does intend to grant his wish.”

“His wish...”

“That’s right. Dad’s wish of ‘wanting to see Mom again’.”

“C-can that even be done?”

“If a monster can be created in 'this world,' it’s possible. We’d be able to meet the people who were swallowed up by 'the other world’...”

“T-then, isn’t that great? We should help too...!”

“No!!”

“Huh...?”

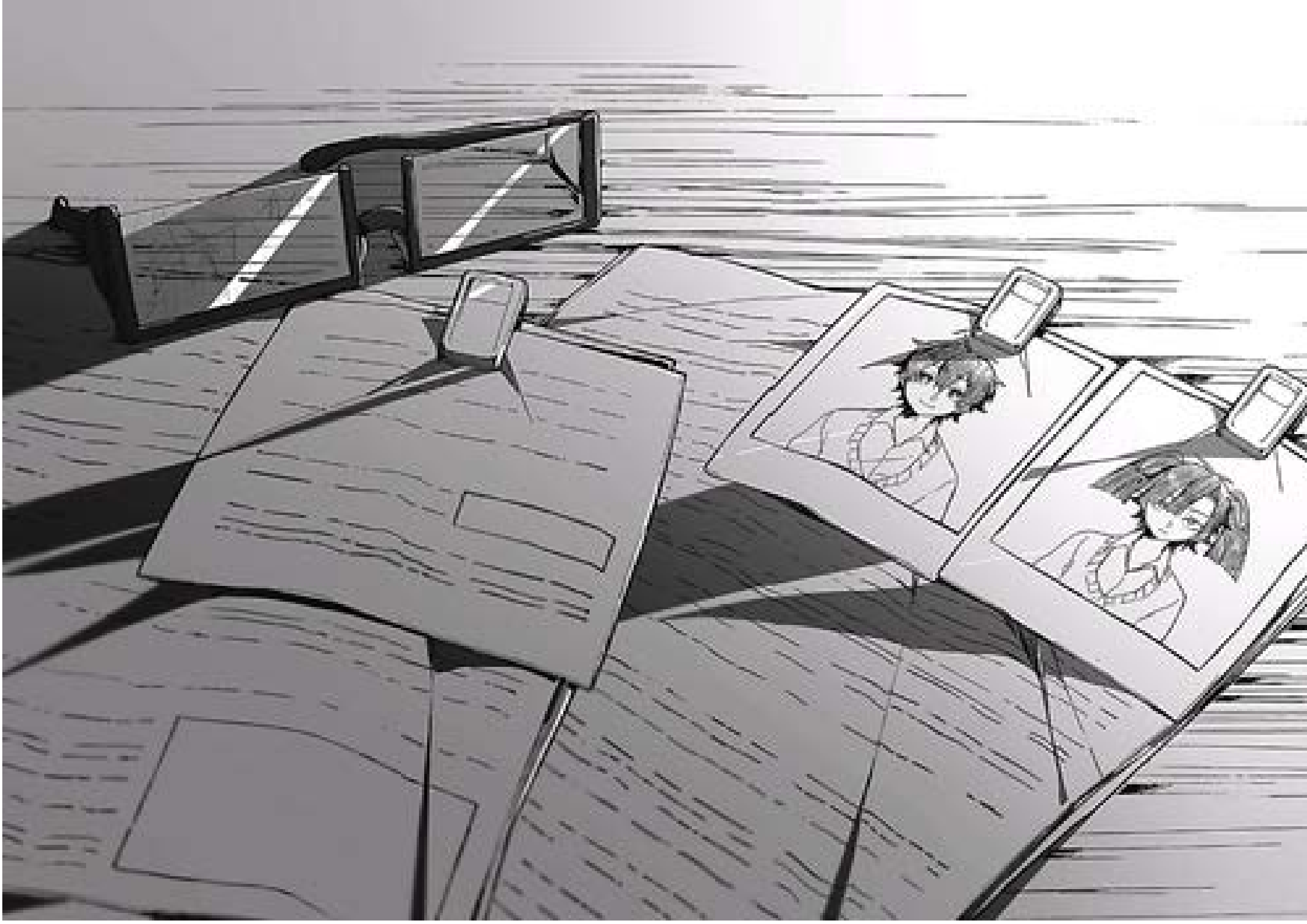
“...In order to create the monster, all the snakes have to be gathered as the 'replacements for life'. To gather the snakes, they have to join into one... That means...”

“That means our...?”

“I... I want to see Mom again too... But, if that means everyone has to die, then that’s unthinkable...!”

“Nee-chan...”

“...Because Mom... was thinking about everyone until the very end. I can’t let everyone die, knowing that...!”





“Your senpai... you mean those people?”

“Yes, Shuuya, you’ve met them at school, right? Takane and Haruka. ...That snake wants the remaining snakes from the other side to attach to their bodies. Probably, it wants them to be swallowed by the other world.”

“Isn’t that murder!? ...N-no matter what, the police won’t allow that, will they?”

“During the period of time that you’ve been going to school for me, I’ve been investigating. That snake has used Dad’s body to do so many horrible things already... and more than that, he has a large amount of funding. Even hospitals, schools, the police... and even more impressive bad guys, they’re all helping that snake...”

“H-how did this...”

“Say, Shuuya... I was thinking, I’m going to try to communicate with the snake. Probably, there’s no other way...”

“Huh!? No way, there’s no way we could! This guy sounds like someone who’d kill anyone it wants!? How would it ever be willing to negotiate with us...!”

“Is that so? But see, if I’m such an idiot, maybe he’ll let his guard down and be willing to talk to me?”

“Don’t joke around like that! If even you’re gone, we’ll.....”

“What are you talking about? Of course, we’ll always~ be together, right? So don’t cry, ok?”

“I don’t... I don’t want... a world where you’re not here...!”

“I said it’d be fine, Shuuya. Don’t forget, I’m the commander of the Mekakushi Dan! That kind of enemy is no match at all for me! So, Shuuya...

Don’t hate the world, ok? I’m sure... everyone will be able to be happy.”



“Nee-chan, no!!”

I pushed open the door, running out.

My sister’s black hair danced in the billowing evening wind as she stood at the edge of the rooftop.

Her silhouette was framed with a bright orange aura, almost surreal, as though she were about to be sucked into the air.

“Shuuya...!”

She called my name, a fearful look on her face.

“D-don’t say weird things like that... You promise we’d... Didn’t you promise we’d be together always?!”

Hearing my words, her expression changed to one of guilt, but she didn’t nod.

“...I know this plan won’t succeed... it’s meaningless if it continues. For senpai, for my family... it’s meaningless if they all get killed, isn’t it?” She said, turning towards the sky, lit aflame by the glow of the sunset.

If she takes one more step forward, her body will definitely fall unrestrainedly towards the ground.

“Stop it! Nee-chan!!”

I screamed out with all my strength, but my sister didn’t turn around, didn’t even look back.

“This... this will pull anyone who’s dead into it, right?”

As her voice fell silent, something like a great black fog seemed to shimmer before her gaze.

I’ve seen it before. It was the greatest “despair” in this world.

I felt like I was going insane at this very moment.

I prayed from the bottom of my heart that the next moment would never arrive. I begged for this despicable world to *stop*.

Anyone, please, save us. Save Nee-chan, and save me.

"I'm sorry, Shuuya. In the end, I'm no good at all. I'm a bit... scared..."

In the end, she said this with tears in her eyes.

Even if I run over now, I won't make it.

My sister's body was lifted powerlessly in the air, and as she disappeared from my field of vision, something in my mind shattered with a loud *crack*.

*".....Heh, I never thought it'd come to this. The more I think about it, the more I feel... I really am beyond shocked by these things."*

".....I'll kill you."

*"Hey now, you know full well, don't you? That I'm the one keeping your dear old Dad alive. So let's not talk of killing or whatnot. ...Speaking of which, though, it seems the plan's failed, thanks to that girl. If all the snakes can't be gathered on this side, I won't be able to bring his wife back. What to do..."*

"Then don't do anything...! At least... at least give me back my dad...!"

*"Idiot. If this plan fails, I can always start over. From the beginning. ...Ah yes, you, why don't you go pretend to be her 'corpse'? You're good at this kind of thing, aren't you? Make sure you're found by someone. I don't care who it is, anyone who has any relation to me will be deemed a suicide. After all, it'd be troublesome if she were marked a missing person."*

"...What are you even... talking about...?!"

*"Don't get me wrong. You, your family... you're all only alive because I'm allowing it. Unless you'd like to see your family lying dead in a pool of their own blood? You don't, do you?"*

"Uu... I..."

*"Your power's still quite useful. As long as you listen to me, I won't do anything too bad to you. ...But listen well. No matter what you do, destiny won't change. Unless you want your family massacred, you'd best tread carefully."*

"Damn it... damn it!"

*"You're all only living in the palm of my hand. Never forget that, brat."*

## On the road the day called today

I wonder if that girl has already got back her original body.

Now that she's back, there may be no meaning whatsoever anymore, but it's good enough for me to be able to complain one last time.

Anyhow, on the rooftop back in those days, since I had no other choice but to put up with her terrible grumbles, I'm glad that I could finally voice my complaints.

Now come to think of it, how, and since when did I begin to tell others about my own tales?

This is, perhaps, the very first time I've ever carried out such an act.

The reason why I was able to talk about my own life story in such a smooth way like that was most likely because the one I was talking to was that twisted kind of girl.

Why do I have the feeling that I and that girl are awfully similar to each other in such weird aspects?

Although since it's come to this, such a thing doesn't really matter anymore.

The street lamps are set up here and there, illuminating the night road I'm walking on. The dim glitter of the light made me feel a strange sense of relief.

With every step I made, the reverberating sound of my boots brought a nice sensation to my ears. Before I noticed, I had come to like the night.

The pitch black color is blotting out my seemingly crumbling complexion.

Thanks to the night wind, those dirty words that may be left unsaid are falsified.

Thanks to the dark, this unsightly distorted heart can be forgiven.

... Before I came to realize, I had already changed.

It's really amazing how I can't even understand that myself.

This me that could only be recognized through pain was already unable to do such a thing as confirming my own existence.

However, there's no longer any merit in thinking about that.

Just a little longer, everything will come to an end.

We are powerless and will soon be crushed under such kind of darkness that even the dark cannot match up with.

... Nevertheless, I did something bad to those boys yesterday.

Even if it was just them, I wanted to help them get away. However, in the end, I wasn't able to do anything.

Just as that snake said, "the snakes" would gather around "the queen" by instinct. That boy was also no exception.

I really couldn't change anything.

Even when I intended to change something, everything just turns out to be exactly the same way as what that snake said in some amusing way,

If even what that snake said about the reason why this world was created was true, there's no way we can do anything.

In the end, what was the meaning of happiness?

For things to turn out this way, it can be said that such a thing didn't exist from the start.

That's right. I can't help but think that even the time I spent in that house, for things to turn out like this, was nothing but a work of fiction.

Suddenly, I could hear the sound of someone else's footsteps. I stopped walking.

When I turned to that direction, I could see the familiar figure of Seto.

"Ah~ Finally! Here you are!"

He said, waving his hand widely and dashing to my side.

"Like really~ I've been looking for ya ever since I finished my part-time job ya know? If ya want to go somewhere, at least tell us beforehand! This is just too cruel!"

"W-Why did you have to do that anyway? I just went out for a while after all."

When I said that, Seto blew up his cheeks.

“Hey! Everyone was worried last night ya know!? If ya not going home, at least contact us!”

Receiving a series of tedious words from Seto, I could feel something began to rise up in my stomach.

How can you use such pompous language when you are completely oblivious of everything?

“I see I see. Gyaa gyaa noisy as hell.”

As I spit out such words, “What’s with ya way of speaking~! You know that was because I was worried about you right?”, Seto drooped, without a care to the world.

... Even I understand the meaning behind those words.

Of course, I know that they’re worried about me.

However, even though it really wasn’t on purpose, the heart of mine that I “myself” have grown unable to comprehend was bursting, bringing along an immense pain with it. From the crack, darkish feelings began to overflow; I couldn’t do anything anymore.

“So annoying! Why don’t you just shut up already!!?”

My scream resounded along the night street.

“Don’t say such selfish things when you don’t even understand anything!! Just speak normally! You’re worried about me? Such superficial words ...”

My feelings successively kept overflowing from my mouth. Even I myself didn’t know what I was uttering anymore.

“W-What’s wrong with ya? Why all of a sudden...”

“Just... Just stop that manner of speech already!! What... Why do you...”

I pressed my knee against the ground. From both my eyes, tears began to spill and fall down.

“Why did everyone change...? Both Seto and Kido... Why has no one ever noticed me?... For nee-chan to have to die alone like that... I can’t take this anymore...”

It’s like I’ve been broken down to a mushy mess.

“That’s enough already... This world...”

“Kano...”

Crouching down, Seto embraced my shoulder tightly.

“It’s alright. It’s alright already...”

“What... What even looks “alright” to you? Goddamn it...”

There’s nothing that can be called “alright”.

It’d be better if this kind of cruel world just ended already. If so...

“I’m sorry for not paying attention to you. Though we’ve been together all this time...”

I can no longer say anything in response to Seto’s words.

“... It’s useless. I was scared... I couldn’t tell anyone... Therefore...”

Without any reservation, Seto clapped me on the back, while I was on the verge of crumbling down.

“I know. I’m sorry for having let you shoulder all that burden on your own... From now on, let’s shoulder the responsibility together OK?”

“... Because we’re brothers.”

Such a nostalgic sensation.

It reminds me of the time when we were still in “Room 107” in the orphanage, of those nights when the two of us used to talk about secrets with each other.

It felt like the good old little me saying “Isn’t that great?” with a smile on his face.

I walked along with Seto on the way to the hide-out.

How will everyone react to this?

Will they come to hate me? I’ve been hiding this kind of story from everyone until now after all.



“That’s not gonna happen. Don’t worry!”

I was caught by surprise at Seto’s words.

“A-are you using your power again...? It feels like forever to be read like that you know? So awkward...”

“E-Eh!? Weren’t ya the one who told me to listen to you just now!?”

“Gehhh! I’m done with that talk already...! I mean, please don’t mention that story in front of everyone OK?”

“Ha ha ha! I won’t! It’s a secret between men!”, said Seto with a beam on his face.

However, I still hung my head in shame. For me to commit so many embarrassing acts like that...

“Ah~ I acted completely out of character. Ah~...”

“That’s alright once in a while, isn’t it!? Once in a while!”

There was no noticeable change in his usual cheerful appearance. Does he really realize the gravity of our situation?

Nevertheless, even if he did realize, maybe he would still make that kind of face. The miserable boy who could do nothing but weep has now grown into such a reliable man.

Just like that, we kept exchanging conversation back and forth on the way back when suddenly, we saw a figure standing in front of the vending machine.

“Urghh... A troublesome person has appeared...”

When the person seemed to have noticed me and Seto, she began to trot towards us.

She is dressed in something resembling a hospital gown that seems to have been snatched from somewhere. Beautiful long black hair is tied into twin tails.

“... Eh? Who’s that person?”

“... Ene-chan.”

As soon as I finished the sentence, Seto’s brain stopped working.

It can't be helped. The line between 2D and 3D isn't that easy to cross. There's no one who can possibly take in our current state that easily.

"Ehhhh!? Isn't Ene-chan supposed to be much more... compact?..."

"Just who do you think you are you calling compact? Huh?"

The girl with an unpleasant look in her eyes is now standing next to us. She is glaring intently at Seto.

"No I mean!? Ah, it's nothing really~..."

Seto, unable to endure the pressure, began to avoid her eyes.

"... Why couldn't you just introduce me as "Takane-san"?"

Takane-san made a sour face as she inquired me.

"Err... Too troublesome... Isn't it fine either way?"

"Hmm~... Takane-san is the way nee-chan addressed you so... OK, from now we will call you Takane-chan!"

"I'm older than you guys you know..." - Takane-chan let out a disgruntled noise, but she didn't reject that nickname.

"... Now come to think of it, what's with you? Is it just me or you seem to be much livelier now? Even though you looked as if you were about to die just a few moments ago..."

"N-No way~ A lot of things happened you know? Oh, and please don't tell anyone about what I told you..."

Even when I still didn't finish my sentence, an evil grin began to form up on Takane-chan's face. This person sure has a twisted personality. Just like a splitting image of myself.

"Eh?~ So it's that embarrassing to pretend to be your sister to go to school eh? I see I see~..."

Takane-chan didn't hide the malice in her voice.

It's not good. I really shouldn't have said a single word to this girl at all. My current situation is no better than that of a fish out of water now.

“Now that you mention it, it seems Takane-chan was able return safe and sound eh? You certainly had so much fun playing around as “Ene-chan” and all...”

The moment I uttered those words, Takane-chan crouched down to the ground and began to hold her head.

“I wanna die I wanna die I wanna die I wanna die...”

It looks like I was able to land a clean hit.

“Arghhh~... Really, what should I do now? I will pull it off! I definitely have to pull it off!”

Well, it can't be help right?

To run rampant and abuse the words “Master! Master!” in front of the enemy you hate so much that you can't stand the very sight of until this very day...

... That's right, I also have to apologize to Shintaro-kun.

Even though I don't expect him to forgive me or anything, I have to tell him the truth about everything...

“What's wrong? Are you worrying about that guy?”

As if empathizing with me, Takane-chan, who had been holding her head, raised her head up to look at me.

“... I suppose. I can't deny that I did some inexcusable things to him.”

“Yeah~ But that guy isn't an idiot. If you explain the situation properly to him, I'm pretty sure he won't get that much affected. I myself also have a lot of thing I've got to tell him no matter what. Let's go talk to him together!”

“... It seems. We'll have to do that.”

Compared to me, Takane-chan does understands a lot more about Shintaro-kun.

They have spent quite a lot time with each other after all.

“Ah, as I thought, it's useless... I want to scream just at the thought of that guy...”

Suddenly, as she uttered those words, Takane-chan began to hold her head again.

“Eh? It’s completely hopeless then! And what? How are you throwing up when you haven’t eaten anything for two years!?”

“No, I had already eaten ramen a while ago before I came.”

“What about the money!?”

“Arrghhh~! Why do you have to be so noisy!? Do you know how long I have to survive without eating anything!?! For two years!? Two years!! I had to get by without eating a single bowl of chashu ramen you know!!?”

“It’s not what I mean. What did you do about the money...”

When we were in the midst of throwing comments back and forth, Seto silently raised his hand.

Now come to think of it, we totally forgot that Seto had always been standing there.

“There’re a few things I can’t quite catch up with in this story...”

Seto said that with his eyes spinning.

It’s fine if we explain the situation to him right now but it’s better if we go back to the hide-out first. We can hold a big explanation session there then.

However, as expected from Seto, he isn’t someone who will just recklessly read others’ minds.

“... Well, regardless of our actions, the situation will become graver from now on, so let’s just go home first OK?”

To reply to my words, both Takane-chan and Seto seemed to say “Roger” at the same time.

“Ah, Takane-chan, can you really put up with all of this? You’ve just come back to your body after all.”

At my questions, Takane-chan raised a small “humph” with her nasal voice.

“Of~course! I also made a promise with Ayano-chan. For now, let’s just find and give that beard old man a good beating! Yeah, this can’t be settled until I go and punch him!”

Takane-chan’s blazing eyes make it look like she doesn’t fully grasp the story, but given our situation, she is the most reliable person.

"I'll also try to talk to Mary! Ya know~, it may be that we are in a pinch, but with everyone, I'm sure we'll be able to pull off something!"

Seto hit me on the back while saying such words.

"It's hurt, it's hurt... Like~ really~ I feel like an idiot for putting up with everything all alone"

Having said that myself, somehow, I unconsciously let out a smile.

Even though we are approaching the end of the world, everyone still remains the same.

"Everyone has changed. It's lonely!". Though I've kinda missed the point, it isn't exactly a bad thing either.

"Heh~ So that's how you smile."

Takane-chan spoke with an amused look in her eyes.

"Eh?"

"That's right~! Kano is really shy so he only smiles once in a while!"

Receiving such a comment like that, my face began to heat up in no time.

"Oh~? Let me see~ So you're hiding again huh?"

Takane-chan wasted no time in making a devilish grin and poking fun at me.

"S-So annoying! Come on, let's hurry back already!"

"Roger! Urrrgh~, but I'm hungry! Let's go eat something first! Let's eat!"

"I did tell you I've eaten ramen already right..."

... Nee-chan.

Are you looking now, nee-chan?

Our place sure has become much busier compared to the past, but as for us, we didn't really change at all.

Today and from now on, I suppose we will still continue this play of secret organization. It's something to laugh about right?

I will soon talk to “him”, the guy nee-chan loved so much, about everything.

Even though I think in the end, he’s just a good-for nothing, and to be honest, he’s really creepy but in one way or another, he’s an interesting person.

I feel that if it’s him, he will go and take nee-chan back from even father or the world, though it’s really a strange tale.

Yes, that’s right. Nee-chan’s number... No.0 has been left unattended since forever. Therefore, when you come back, let’s play our silly games together with everyone once again!

That’s why, please wait for us...

Please wait for us just a little longer, nee-chan!